



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES



3 3433 07576322 1

GREEN BOUGH

E. TEMPLE THURSTON



THE GREEN BOUGH

E. TEMPLE THURSTON

Books By E. Temple Thurston

The Green Bough

The City of Beautiful Nonsense

The World of Wonderful Reality

Enchantment

The Five-Barred Gate

The Passionate Crime

Achievement

Richard Furlong

The Antagonists

The Open Window

The Apple of Eden

Traffic

The Realist

The Evolution of Katherine

Mirage

Sally Bishop

The Greatest Wish in the World

The Patchwork Papers

The Garden of Resurrection

The Flower of Gloster

Thirteen

THE
GREEN BOUGH

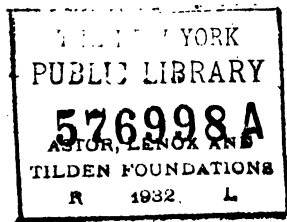
BY
E. TEMPLE THURSTON

AUTHOR OF "THE CITY OF BEAUTIFUL NONSENSE,"
"THE WORLD OF WONDERFUL REALITY," ETC.



NEW YORK
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
NEW YORK MCMXXI



COPYRIGHT, 1921, BY
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

NOV 27 1932
LIBRARY
VIA RAIL

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

32 X 8

TO
E. F. COWLIN

PHASE I

I

THE life of Mary Throgmorton, viewed as one would scan the chronicles of history, impersonally, without regard to the conventions, is the life of a woman no more than fulfilled in the elements of her being.

All women would be as Mary Throgmorton if they dared. All women would love as Mary Throgmorton loved — suffer as she suffered. Perhaps not all might yield, as she yielded towards the end; not all might make her sacrifices. But, in the latitudinous perspective of Time where everything vanishes to the point of due proportion, she must range with that vast army of women who have hungered, loved, been fed and paid the reckoning with the tears out of their eyes and the very blood out of their hearts.

It is only when she comes to be observed in the immediate and narrow surroundings of her circumstance that her life stands out tragically apart. She becomes then as a monument, set up on a high and lonely hill amongst the many of those hills in drowsy Devon, a monument, silently claiming the birthright of all women which the laws men make by force have so ungenerously circumscribed.

There is no woman who could look at that monu-

THE GREEN BOUGH

ment without secret emotions of a deep respect, while there were many in her lifetime who spurned Mary Throgmorton with tongue and with a glance of eye, and still would spurn her to-day in the narrow streets where it is their wont to walk.

The respect of one's neighbors is a comforting thing to live with, but it is mostly the little people who earn it and find the pleasure of its warmth. The respect of the world is won often by suffering and in the wild and open spaces of the earth. It was on Gethsemane and not in Bethlehem that Christianity revealed its light.

In Bridnorth, the name of Mary Throgmorton was a byword for many a day. They would have erased her from their memory if they could. It was in the hush of voices they spoke of her—that hush with which women muffle and conceal the envy beneath their spite.

No one woman in Bridnorth, unless it was Fanny Throgmorton, the third of her three sisters, could have had honesty enough in her heart to confess, even in silence, her real regard for Mary.

Who should blame them for this? The laws had made them and what is made in a shapen mold can bend neither to the left nor to the right. They were too close to her to see her beauty; all too personally involved to look dispassionately at the greatness of her soul.

Yet there in spirit, as it were some graven monument upon those hills of Devon, she stands, a figure of

THE GREEN BOUGH

tragic nobility. Had indeed they carved her in stone and set her there upon the hills that overlooked the sea, they would have recognized then in her broad brow, in the straight direction of her eyes, the big, if not beautiful then generous line of her lips, the full firm curve of her breasts, how fine a mate she must have made, how strong a mother even in the weakest hour of her travail.

Stone truly would have been the medium for her. It was not in color that she claimed the eye. The fair hair, neither quite golden nor quite brown, that clear, healthy skin, neither warmed with her blood nor interestingly pale, these would have franked her passage in a crowd and none might have noticed her go by.

There on the rising of that cliff in imagination is the place to see her with the full sweep of Bridnorth bay and that wide open sea below and all the heathered stretches of the moors behind her. There, had they carved a statue for her in rough stone, you must have seen at once the beauty that she had.

But because it was in stone her beauty lay and not in pink white flesh that makes a fool of many a man, they had the less of mercy for her. Because it was in stone, man found her cold of touch and stood away. And yet again because it was in stone, once molten with the heat of life, there was no hand in little Bridnorth that could have stayed her fate.

Once stirred, the little pettiness of Bridnorth folk charred all like shavings from the plane at touch of her. Once stirred, she had in her passion to defy

THE GREEN BOUGH

them every one. Once stirred, herself could raise that monument to the birthright of women which, in fancy, as her tale is read, will be seen there over Bridnorth on the high cliff's edge.

II

HANNAH, Jane, Fanny and Mary, these were the four sisters of the Throgmorton family in the order of their respective ages. A brother they had, but he comes into no part of this history. The world had taken him when he was twenty-three. He left Bridnorth, the mere speck upon the map it was and, with the wide affairs of life at his touch, the mere speck it became in his memory. Stray letters reached Mary, his favorite sister. Read aloud at the breakfast table, they came, bringing strange odors of the world to those four girls. Vague emotions they experienced as they heard these infrequent accounts of where he was and what he did.

Silently Fanny's imagination would carry her to the far places he wrote of. Into the big eyes she had would rise a haze of distance across which an untrained vision had power vaguely to transport her. Hannah listened in a childish wonder. Jane made her sharp comments. It was Mary who said —

“Why do men have the real best of it? He'll never come back to Bridnorth again.”

He never did come back. From the time their father and mother died they lived in Bridnorth alone.

Theirs was the square, white early Victorian house

THE GREEN BOUGH

in the middle of the village through which the coach road runs from Abbotscombe to King's Tracey.

That early Victorian house, the furniture it contained, the narrow strip of garden in front protected from the road by low iron palings so that all who passed could see in the front windows, the unusually large garden at the back surrounded by a high brick wall, all these composed the immediate atmosphere in which Mary and her three sisters had been brought up from childhood.

It must be supposed that that condition of being overlooked through the front windows was not without its effect upon their lives. If it takes all sorts to make a world, it is all the variety of conditions that go to make such sorts as there are. For it was not only the passers-by who looked in at the Throgmorton windows and could have told to a fraction of time when they had their meals, when Hannah was giving lessons to the children she taught, those hours that Fanny was sitting alone in her bedroom writing her verses of poetry. Also it was the Throgmorton girls themselves who preferred the occupation of the rooms fronting the road to those whose windows overlooked the shady and secluded garden at the back.

This was the attraction of the stream for those who walk in quiet meadows. There on the banks you will find the footpath of the many who have passed that way. They sat at those front windows, sewing, reading, often writing their letters on blotting pads upon their laps, scarcely conscious that the little filtering

THE GREEN BOUGH

stream of life in Bridnorth drew them there. For had they been questioned on these matters, one and all, severally or together they would have laughed, saying that for the greater half of the year there was no life in Bridnorth to pass by, and certainly none that concerned them.

Nevertheless it was the stream, however lightly they may have turned the suggestion away. The passing of the postman, of the Vicar or the Vicar's wife, these were the movements of life, such as you see in a meadow stream and follow, dreaming in your mind, as they catch in the eddies and are whirled and twisted out of sight. So they had dreamt in their minds, in Bridnorth, these Throgmorton girls. So Mary had dreamed the twenty years and more that dreams had come to her.

For the greater half of the year, they might have said there was no life in Bridnorth. But from late Spring through Summer to the Autumn months they must have claimed with pride that their Devon village had a life of its own. The old coach with its four horses, beating out the journey from Abbotscombe to King's Tracey, brought visitors from all parts; generally the same every year. For a few months they leased whatever furnished houses there were to be had, coming regularly every season for the joy of that quiet place by the sea where there was a sandy beach to bathe on, and lonely cliffs on which to wander their holidays away.

So the Throgmorton girls made friends with some

THE GREEN BOUGH

whose lives lay far outside the meadows through which the Bridnorth stream flowed peacefully between its banks. To these friends sometimes they paid visits when the Summer was passed. They went out of Bridnorth themselves by the old coach, later returning, like pigeons homing, with the wind of the outside world still in their wing feathers, restless for days until the dreams came back again. Then once more it seemed a part of life to sit at the window sewing and watch the postman go by.

There were regular visitors who came every summer, renewing their claim from year to year upon the few houses that were to be let, so that there was little available accommodation of that nature for any outsiders. They called Bridnorth theirs, and kept it to themselves. But every year, they had their different friends to stay with them and always there was the White Hart, where strangers could secure rooms by the day or the week all through the season.

The Bridnorth stream was in flood those days of the late Spring where every afternoon the coach came rumbling up the hill past the Throgmortons' house to set down its passengers at the hotel only a little farther up the road.

Like the Severn bore it was, for coming from Abbotscombe down the winding road that had risen with the eminence of the cliffs, the coach could be seen descending by twists and turns and serpentine progressions to the bottom of Bridnorth village, crossing the bridge that spans the little river Watchett and climbing

THE GREEN BOUGH

again with the contour of the cliffs once more on its way to King's Tracey.

Leaning far out of one of the upper windows of the square, white house or standing even at the gate in the iron paling, the little cloud of dust or, in rainy weather, the black speck moving slowly like a fly crawling down a suspended thread of cotton, could easily be seen two miles away heralding the coming of the coach.

She who leant out of the window might certainly retire, closing it slowly as the coach drew near. She who stood at the gate in the iron palings might return casually into the house. But once they were out of sight of those on the other bank of the Bridnorth stream, there would be voices crying through the rooms that the coach was coming.

Thus, as it passed, there might four figures be seen at different windows, who, however engrossing their occupations, would look out with confessions of mild interest at the sound of the horses' hoofs on the stony road, at the rattle of harness, the rumbling of wheels and, casually, at the passengers come to Bridnorth.

Any visitor catching sight of these temperate glances from his box seat on the coach might have supposed the eyes that offered them were so well-used to that daily arrival as to find but little entertainment in the event. From their apparent indifference, he would never have believed that even their hearts had added a pulse in the beating, or that to one at least that coach was the vehicle of Fate which any day might bring the burden of her destiny.

III

IT is by the ages of these four they can most easily and comprehensively be classified; yet the age of one at least of them was never known, or ever asked in Bridnorth.

Hannah might have been forty or more. She might well have been less. But the hair was gray on her head and she took no pains to conceal it. Hers, if any, was the contented soul in that household. With her it was not so much that she had given up the hope that every woman has, as that before she knew what life might be, that hope had passed her by. She was as one who stands in a crowd to see the runners pass and, before even she has raised herself on tiptoe to catch a glimpse above the heads around her, is told that the race is over.

This was Hannah, busying her life with the household needs and, for interest, before all reward, teaching the little children of friends in Bridnorth and the neighborhood, teaching them their lessons every morning; every morning kissing them when they came, every morning kissing them when they left.

To her, the arrival of the coach was significant no more than in the unaccustomed passage and hurry of life it brought. To her it was a noise in a silent street. She came to the windows as a child would come to see a circus go by. She watched its passengers descend out-

THE GREEN BOUGH

side the Royal George with the same light of childish interest in her eyes. Nothing of what those passengers were or what they meant reached the communicating functions of her mind. They were no more than mere performers in the circus ring. What their lives were behind that flapping canvas of the tent, which is the veil concealing the lives of all of us, she did not trouble to ask herself. Like the circus performers, they would be here to-day and to-morrow their goods and chattels would be packed, the naphtha flares beneath whose light they had for a moment appeared would be extinguished. Only the bare ring over which their horses had pranced would remain in Hannah's mind to show where they had been. And in Hannah's mind the grass would soon grow again to blot it out of sight.

To Hannah Throgmorton, these advents and excursions were no more than this.

IV

SOMEHOW they knew in Bridnorth that Jane was thirty-six. She hid her gray beneath the careful combing of her back hair.

There is a different attitude of mind in the woman who hides these things successfully and her who still hides but knows that she fails. Sharp antagonism and resentment, this is the mind of the latter. Not only does she know that she fails. She knows how others realize that she has tried. Yet something still urges in her purpose.

Jane knew she failed. That was bitter enough. But the greater bitterness lay in the knowledge that had she succeeded it would have been of no avail. For some years, unlike her sister Hannah, she had relinquished hope, flung it aside in all consciousness of loss; flung it aside and often looked her God in the face with the accusing glances of unconcealed reproach.

To Jane that coming of the coach was the reminding spur that pricked her memories to resentment. No Destiny for her was to be found in the freight it carried. For each passenger as they descended outside the Royal George, she had her caustic comment. Hers was the common but forgivably ungenerous spirit of the critic in whose breast the milk of human kindness has grown sour from standing overlong in the idleness of impotent ability.

THE GREEN BOUGH

Yet reminding spur that it was, and deeply as it hurt her, her eyes were as swift and sharp as any to take note of the new arrivals. Perhaps it was the very pain that she cherished. Life is a texture of sensations, and if only the thread of pain be left to keep the whole together, there are many who welcome it rather than feel the bare boards beneath their feet.

Whenever a man, strange to them amongst the regular visitors to Bridnorth, slipped off the coach at the Royal George, she knew his arrival meant nothing in Destiny to her. Yet often she would be the first to pick him out.

"He's new. Wonder if he's come with the Tolhursts."

And having taken him in with a swiftness of apprehension, her glances would shoot from Fanny to Mary and back again as though she could steal the secrets of Fate out of their eyes.

It was Fanny she read most easily of all; Fanny who in such moments revealed to the shrewdness of her gaze that faint acceleration of pulse, to the realization of which nothing but the bitterness in her heart could have sharpened her. It was upon Fanny then in these moments her observation concentrated. Mary eluded her. Indeed Mary, it seemed, was the calmest and serenest of them all. Sometimes if she were engrossed in reading she did not even come to the window, but was content from her chair to hear what they had to report.

And when there were no visitors descending from the

THE GREEN BOUGH

coach, in language their brother had long brought home from school and left behind him in phrases when he went, it was Jane, with a laugh, who turned upon those other three and said —

“What a suck for everybody!”

V

THEN there was Fanny, whose age in Bridnorth was variously guessed to be between thirty and thirty-three. No one knew. Her sisters never revealed it. Jane had her loyalties and this was one.

Only Fanny herself, in those quiet moments when a woman is alone before the judgment of her own mirror, knew that the gray hairs had begun to make their appearance amidst the black. They were not even for concealment yet. It was as though they tried to hide themselves from the swift searching of her eyes. But she had found them out. Each one as pensively she rolled it round her fingers, hiding it away or burning it in the fire, was a thorn that pricked and drew blood.

Hope had not yet been laid aside by her. In that vivid if untrained imagination of hers, Romance still offered her promise of the untold joys and ecstasies of a woman's heart. She had not laid Hope aside, but frettingly and constantly Hope was with her. She was conscious of it, as of a hidden pain that warns of some disease only the knife can cure.

Always she was clutching it and only the writing of her ill-measured verses of poetry could anesthetize her knowledge of its presence. Then, when she was beating out her fancies in those uncomely words of almost

THE GREEN BOUGH

childish verse, the pain of the hope she had would lie still, soothed to sleepfulness by the soporific of her wandering imagination.

What, can it be supposed, was the coming of the coach to her?

The vehicle of Fate it has been said it was, bringing a Destiny which for thirty years and more had lingered on its journey, for never had it been set down at the Royal George.

Already she knew that she was tired of waiting for it. Often that tiredness overcame her. Through the long winter months when the Bridnorth stream was languid and shallow in its flow, she became listless when she was not irritable, and the look of those thirty-three years was added in their fullness in her eyes.

A visit into the world amongst those friends they had, transitory though those visits may have been, revived courage in her. And all through the Spring and Summer season, she fought that fatigue as a woman must and will so long as the hope of Romance has even one red spark of fire in her heart.

It was not a man so much she wanted, as Romance. She alone could have told what was meant by that. The one man she had known had almost made her hate his sex. It was not so much to her a stranger who stepped down outside the Royal George and trod her pulse to acceleration, as the urgent wonder of what might happen in the weeks to come; of what might happen to her in the very core of her being. He was

THE GREEN BOUGH

no more than a medium, an instrument to bring about those happenings. She knew in herself what ecstasy she could suffer, how her heart could throb behind her wasted breast, how every vein threading her body would become the channel for a warmer race of blood.

It was not so much that she wanted a man to love as to feel love itself with all its accompanying sensations of fear and wonder, yet knowing all the time that before these emotions could happen to her, she must attract and be found acceptable, must in another waken some strange need to be the kindling spark in her.

Only once had it seemed she had succeeded. There had come a visitor to the Royal George with whom in the ordinary course of the summer life of Bridnorth, acquaintance had soon been made. None of them were slow to realize the interest he had taken in Fanny. Before he left they twice had walked over the moors to where on the highest and loneliest point of the cliffs you can see the whole sweep of Bridnorth bay and in clear weather the first jutting headland on the Cornish coast.

Many a love match in Bridnorth had been made about those heathered moors. It was no love match he made with Fanny. What happened only Mary knew. He had taken Fanny in his arms and he had kissed her. For many months she had felt those kisses, not in the touch of his lips so much as in waves of emotion that tumbled in a riot through her veins and left her trembling in the darkness of night. For he had never told her that he loved her.

THE GREEN BOUGH

In three weeks he had gone away having said no word to bind her. In two months' time or little more, she read of his marriage in the London papers and that night stared and stared at her reflection in the mirror when she went to bed.

For in her heart and below the communicating consciousness of her thoughts, she knew what had happened. Never could she have told herself; far less spoken of it to others. But while he had held her in his arms, she had known even then. She had felt her body thin and spare and meager against his. Something unalluring in herself she had realized as his lips touched the eagerness of her own.

That strange need of which in experience she had no knowledge, she knew in that instant had not wakened in him as he held her. However passionate his kisses in their strangeness had seemed, they lacked a fire of which, knowing nothing, she yet knew all.

Still, nevertheless, she waited and the fatigue of that waiting each year was added in her eyes.

The coming of the coach to her was like that of a ship, hard-beating into harbor with broken spars and sails all rent. Yet with every coming, her heart lifted, and with every new arrival, strange to Bridnorth, her eyes would wear a brighter light, her laugh would catch a brighter ring.

"Really, you'd never think Fanny was thirty-three!" Hannah once said on one of these occasions.

"You wait for a week or two," retorted Jane.

And in a week or two when the visitor had departed,

THE GREEN BOUGH

Jane would catch Hannah's eyes across the breakfast table and direct them silently to Fanny sitting there. There was no need to say—"I told you so." Jane could convey all and more in her glance than that. She took charge of Hannah's vision, as Hannah took charge of her children. That was enough.

VI

IT was to Mary Throgmorton in those days that this coming of the Abbotscombe coach is most elusive of all to define. So much less of the emotions of hopefulness, of curiosity, or even of childish interest did she betray, that there is little in action or conduct to illuminate her state of mind.

In those days, which must be understood to mean the beginning of this history, and in fact were the final decade of the last century, Mary was twenty-nine.

That is a significant age and, to any more versed in experience than she, must bring deep consideration with it. By then a woman knows the transitoriness of youth; she realizes how short is the span of time in which a woman can control her destiny. She sees in the eyes of others that life is slipping by her; she discovers how those who were children about her in her youth are gliding into the age of attractiveness, claiming attention that is not so readily hers as it was or as she imagines perhaps it might have been.

In such a state of mind must many a woman pause. It is as though for one instant she had power to arrest the traffic of time that she might take this crossing in the streets of life with unhampered deliberation. For

THE GREEN BOUGH

here often she will choose her direction in the full consciousness of thought. No longer dare she leave her destiny to the hazard of chance. It has become, not the Romance that will happen upon her in the glorious and unexpected suddenness of ecstasy, but the Romance she must find, eager in her searching, swift in her choice lest life all go by and the traffic of time sweep over her.

This choice she must make or work must save her, for life has become as vital to women as it is to men. At twenty-nine this is many a woman's dilemma. Yet at twenty-nine no such consciousness of the need of deliberation had entered the mind of Mary Throgmorton. Perhaps it was because there were no younger creatures about her, growing up to the youth she was leaving behind; perhaps because in the quietness of seclusion by that Bridnorth stream, the gentle, rippling song of it had never wakened her to life.

In the height of its flood, that Bridnorth stream had never a note to distress the placidity of her thoughts. She had heard indeed the Niagara of life in London, but as a tourist only, standing for a moment on its brink with a guide-shouting the mere material facts of so-called interest in her ears. It was all too deafening and astounding to be more than a passing wonder in her mind. She would return to Bridnorth with its thunder roaring in her ears, glad of the quiet stream again and having gained no more experience of life than does an American tourist of the life of London when he counts the steps up to the dome of St. Paul's

THE GREEN BOUGH

Cathedral and hurries down to catch the train to the birthplace of Shakespeare.

At twenty-nine, Mary Throgmorton was in many respects still the same girl as when at the age of eighteen she had first bound that fair hair upon her head and looked with all the seriousness of her gray eyes at the vision the reflecting mirror presented to her. Scarcely had she noticed her growth into womanhood for, as has been said, her beauty was not that of the flesh that is pink and white. It was in stone her beauty lay and even her own hands did not warm to the touch of it. But where in Bridnorth was there kindling enough to light so fierce a fire as she needed to overwhelm her?

This is the tragedy of a thousand women who pass through life and never touch its meaning; these thousand women who one day will alter the force-made laws for a world built nearer to the purpose of their being; these thousand women to whom the figure of Mary Throgmorton stands there by Bridnorth village in her monument of stone upon the Devon cliffs.

With all this unconsciousness of design in the pattern of her life, the coming of the coach to Mary is well-nigh too subtle to admit of capture in the rigid medium of words. Truly enough, if deeply engaged in one of the many books she read, there were times and often when, from those front windows of the square, white house, she would let her sisters report upon the new or strange arrivals set down outside the Royal George.

THE GREEN BOUGH

Even Jane, with her shrewdness of vision, was misled by this into the belief that Mary cared less than them all what interest the Abbotscombe coach might bring for the moment into their lives.

"I wonder what his handicap is," she had said when they had described a young man descending from the box seat with a bag of golf clubs.

Notwithstanding all Mary's undoubted excellence at that game or indeed at any game to which she gave her hand, Jane, disposed by nature to doubt, would sharply look at her. But apparently there was no intention to deceive. If the book was really engrossing, she would return to its pages no sooner than the remark was made, as though time would prove what sort of performer he was, since all golfers who came to Bridnorth found themselves glad to range their skill against hers on the links.

And when, as it happened, she joined them at those front windows, consenting to their little deceptions of casual interest in the midst of more important occupations—for Jane would say, "Mary, you can't just stare"—it was with no more than calculation as to what amusement the visitors would provide that Mary appeared to regard their arrival.

Not one of them, however, not even Fanny, knew that there were days in those Spring and Summer months, when Mary, setting forth with her strong stride and walking alone up on to the heathered moors would, with intention, seat herself in a spot where the Abbotscombe coach could be seen winding its way

THE GREEN BOUGH

down the hill into Bridnorth. It was one spot alone from which the full stretch of the road could be observed. By accident one day she had found it, just at that hour when the coach went by. She had known and made use of it for six years and more.

At first it was the mere interest of a moving thing passing in the far line of vision to its determined destination; the interest of that floating object the stream catches in its eddies and carries in its flowing out of sight.

So it was at first, until in some subconscious way it grew to hold for her a sense of mystery. She would never have called it mystery herself — the attraction had no name in her mind. No more did she do than sit and watch its passage, dimly conscious that that little moving speck upon the road, framed in its aura of dust, was moving into the horizon of her life and as soon would move out again, leaving her the same as she was before.

Habit it was to think she would be left the same; yet always whilst it was there in the line of her eyes, it had seemed that something, having no word in her consciousness, might happen to her with its passing.

So vividly sometimes it appeared to be moving directly into her life. So vividly sometimes, when it had gone, it appeared to have left her behind. She would have described it no more graphically or consciously than that.

For during those six years, nothing indeed had happened to her. The passing of the coach along that

THE GREEN BOUGH

thread of road had remained a mystery. Companions and acquaintances it had brought and often; women with whom she had formed friendships, men with whom she had played strenuously and enjoyably in their games of golf.

Never had it brought her even such an experience as her elder sister's. She had never wished it should. There was no such readiness to yield in her as there was in Fanny; no undisguised eagerness for life such as might tempt the heartlessness of a man to a passing flirtation.

She treated all men the same with the frank candor of her nature, which allowed no familiarity of approach. Only with his heart could a man have reached her, never with his arms or his lips as Fanny had been.

Perhaps in those brief acquaintanceships, mainly occupied with their games, there was no time for the deeper emotions of a man's heart to be stirred. But most potent reason of all, it was that she had none of the superficial allurements of her sex. Strength was the beauty of her. It was a common attitude of hers to stand with legs apart set firmly on her feet as she talked. Yet there was no masculinity she conveyed. Only it was that so would a man find her if he sought passion in her arms and perhaps they feared the passion they might discover.

It was the transitoriness not only of hers but of all those women's touch with life that made the pattern of their destiny. No man had stayed long enough in Bridnorth to discover the tenderness and nobility of

THE GREEN BOUGH

Mary Throgmorton. In that cold quality of her beauty they saw her remotely and only in the distances in which she placed herself. None had come close enough to observe that gentle smile the sculptor had curved about her lips, the deep and tender softness of her eyes. It was in outline only they beheld her, never believing that beneath that firm full curve of her breast there could beat a heart as wildly and as fearfully as a netted bird's, or that once beating so, that heart would beat for them forever.

It was just the faint knowledge of this in herself which made that passing coach a mystery to Mary. It was not as with Fanny that she thought of it as a vehicle of her Destiny, but that, as she sat there on the moors above Bridnorth, it was a link with the world she had so often read of in her books.

It came to her out of the blue over the hill, as a pigeon come with a message under its wing. Detaching that message again and again, she read it in a whisper in her heart.

"There is life away there beyond the hill," it ran. "There is life away there beyond the hill — and life is pain as well as joy and life is sorrow as well as happiness; but life is ours and we are here to live."

That message somewhere in the secrets of her heart she kept and every time the coach passed by when she was in the house the horses' hoofs on the village road beat in her thoughts — "Life is ours, we are here to live."

VII

PORTRAITS in oil of Mr. and Mrs. Throgmorton hung on the walls of the dining-room in their square, white house. Though painted by a local artist when Mary was quite a child, they had one prominent virtue of execution. They were arresting likenesses.

It is open to question whether a man has a right to impose his will when he is gone upon those who follow after him. With Mr. and Mrs. Throgmorton it was not so much an imposition of will. Their money had been left without reservation to be divided equally amongst the four girls. If any imposition there might be, it was of their personality. Looking down at their children from those two portraits on the wall, they still controlled the spirit of that house as surely as when they had been alive.

Every morning and evening, Hannah read the prayers as her father had done before her. No more could she have ceased from doing this than could any one of them have removed his portrait from its exact place in the dining-room.

It was the look in her father's and her mother's eyes more than any comment of her sisters' that Fanny feared to meet after her episode with the visitor to Bridnorth.

THE GREEN BOUGH

For in their lifetime, Mr. and Mrs. Throgmorton had been parents of that rigid Victorian spirit. Love they must have given their children or their influence would never have survived. Love indeed they did give, but it was a stern and passionless affection.

Looking down upon their four daughters in those days of the beginning of this story, they must have been well satisfied that if not one of them had found the sanctity of married life then at least not one of them, unless perhaps it was Fanny, had known the shame of an unhallowed passion.

Fanny they might have had their doubts about. After that episode she often felt they had; often seemed to detect a glance not so much of pity as of pain in her mother's eyes. At her father, for some weeks after the visitor's departure, she was almost afraid to look. In his life he had been just. He would have been just in his condemnation of her then. Self-control had been the measure of all his actions. Of self-control in that moment on the cliffs she knew she had had none. She had leant herself into his arms because in the violent beating of her breast it had seemed she had no strength to do otherwise. And when he kissed her, it had felt as though all the strength she had in her soul and body had been taken from her into his.

Had her father known such sensations as that when he talked of self-control?

Well indeed did she know what her mother would have said. To all those four girls she had said the same with parental regard; and to each one severally

THE GREEN BOUGH

as they had come to that age when she had felt it expedient to enlighten them.

“God knows,” she had always begun, for the use of the name of God hallowed such moments as these to her and softened the terribleness of all she had to say, “God knows, my dear, what future there is in store for you. If it is His will you should never marry, you will be spared much of the pain, much of the trouble and the penalties of life. I love your father. No woman could have loved him more. He is a fine and a good man. But there are things a woman must submit to in her married life — that is the cross she must bear — which no words of mine can describe to you. Nevertheless, don’t think I complain. Don’t think I do not realize there is a blessed reward. Her children are the light of life to her. Without them, I dread to think what she must suffer at the hands of Nature when the mercy of God has no recompense in store. Eve was cursed with the bearing of children, but they brought the mercy of God to her in their little hands when once they were born.”

This usually had been her concluding phrase. This without variation she repeated to all of them. Of this phrase, if vanity she had at all, she was greatly proud. It seemed to her, in illuminating language to comprise the whole meaning of her discourse.

Hannah, Jane, Fanny, all in their turn had accepted it in silence. It had been left to Mary to say —

“It seems hard on a man that he should have to suffer, because he doesn’t get the reward of having

THE GREEN BOUGH

children like the woman does. Of course they're his — but he doesn't bring them into the world."

At this issue, Mrs. Throgmorton had taken her daughter's hands in hers and, in a tone of voice Mary had never forgotten, she had replied —

"I never said, my dear, that the man did suffer. He doesn't. If it were not for the sanctity of marriage, it would have to be described as unholy pleasure to him. That pleasure a woman must submit to. That pleasure it is her bitter duty to give. That's why I say I dread to think what she must suffer, as some unfortunately do, when the mercy of God does not recompense her with the gift of children."

Closely watching her daughter's face in the silence that followed, Mrs. Throgmorton had known that Mary's mind was not yet satisfied with the food for thought and conduct she had given it. She became conscious of a dread of what this youngest child of hers would say next. And when Mary spoke at last, her worst fears were realized.

"Can a woman," she said, "give pleasure to the man she loves when all the time she is suffering shame and agony herself? If he loves her, what pleasure could it be to him?"

Mrs. Throgmorton had closed her eyes and doubtless in that moment of their closure she had prayed. So confused had been her mind in face of this question that for the instant she could do no more than say —

"What do you mean?"

"Well — simply —" replied Mary in a childlike in-

THE GREEN BOUGH

nocence — “ simply that it seems to me if a woman is giving pleasure to a man she really loves, she must be getting pleasure herself. If I give you a present at Christmas and you like it and it gives you pleasure, I’m not sure it doesn’t give me more pleasure than you to see you pleased, because — well, because I love you. Why do you say ‘ It’s more blessed to give than to receive ’ ? ”

That little touch of affection from her daughter had stirred Mrs. Throgmorton’s heart. Unable to restrain herself, she had taken Mary’s hands again with a closer warmth in her own.

“ Ah, more blessed, dear — yes — there is of course the pleasure of blessedness, the satisfaction of duty uncomplainingly done. I have never denied that.”

She had spoken this triumphantly, feeling that light at last had been shown in answer to her prayer. Not for a moment was she expectant of her daughter’s reply.

“ I don’t mean that, mother,” Mary had said. “ Satisfaction seems to me a thing you know in your own heart. No one can share it with you. Of course I don’t know the feelings of a man, how could I? I’m not married. But if I were a man it wouldn’t give me any pleasure to think that the woman I loved was just satisfied because she’d done her duty. I should want to share my pleasure with her, not look on at a distance at her satisfaction. If a man ever loves me, I believe I shall feel what he feels and if I do, I shall be glad of it and make him glad too.”

THE GREEN BOUGH

She had said it all without emotion, almost without one note of feeling in her voice; but the mere words themselves were sufficient to strike terror into Mrs. Throgmorton's heart. That terror showed itself undisguised in her face.

"My dear — my dear —" she whispered — "I pray God you never do feel so, or if it be His will you should, that you will never forget your modesty or your self-respect so much as to reveal it to any man however much you may love him."

To these four girls in that square, white house in Bridnorth, this was such an influence as still reigned in undisputed sway. The eyes of their parents from those portraits still looked down upon them at their prayers or at their meals. Still the voice of Mrs. Throgmorton whispered in Mary's ears — "I pray God you will never forget your modesty or your self-respect." Still, even when she was twenty-nine, Mary's eyes would lift to her father's face gazing down from the wall upon her, wondering if he had ever known the life she had suspicion of from the books she read. Still she would glance at them both, prepared to believe that, however dominant it was in their home, the expression of their lives had been only the husk of existence.

And then perhaps at that very moment the coach might pass by on its way to the Royal George and the horses' hoofs would sing as they beat upon the road — "Life is ours — we are here to live — Life is ours — we are here to live."

THE GREEN BOUGH

Yet there in Bridnorth at twenty-nine, no greater impetus had come to her to live than the most vague wonderings, the most transient of dreams.

VIII

IT was the Sunday before Christmas of the year 1894. No coach had come to Bridnorth for three weeks. The snow which had fallen there was still lying six inches deep all over the countryside and on the roads where it had been beaten down at all, was as hard as ice. Footmarks had mottled it. It shone in the sun like the skin of a snow leopard.

The hills around Bridnorth and all the fields as far as eye could see were washed the purest white. Every hedge had its mantle, every tree and every branch its sleeves of snow. The whole world seemed buried. Scarce one dark object was to be seen. Only the sea stretched dark and gray like ice water, the little waves in that still air there was, falling on the beach with the brittle noises of breaking glass.

Only for this, a silence had fallen everywhere. Footsteps made no sound. The birds were hidden in the hearts of the hedges and even when hunger drew them forth in search of berries, it was without noise they went, in swift, dipping flights — a dark thing flashing by, no more.

Every one put on goloshes to climb or descend the hill to church. The Vicar and his wife came stepping over from the Vicarage close by like a pair of storks and when the bell stopped ringing it was as though an-

THE GREEN BOUGH

other cloak of silence had been flung over Bridnorth village. The Vicar felt that additional silence as acutely as any one. It seemed to him it fell to prepare the way for worship in the house of God and the sermon he was about to preach.

The attendance that morning was no different from what it would have been had the roads been clear. Going to church in the country is a comfortable habit. At their midday meal afterwards the subject of the attendance would crop up at the Vicar's table as it always did, ever full of interest as is the subject of the booking-office returns to a theatrical manager. He would congratulate himself upon the numbers he had seen below him from that eminence of the pulpit and would have been hurt beyond degree had any one suggested it was largely habit that brought them there.

The Throgmorton family would no more have thought of staying away because of the weather than they would have thought of turning the two portraits in the dining-room with their faces to the wall.

They collected in the square hall of the square, white house. They put on their gloves and their goloshes; they held their prayer books in their hands; they each looked for the last time to see that their threepenny bits were safe in the palms of their gloves. Then they set off.

The church in the country is a meeting place in a sense other than that of worship. You may desire at most times the quietness of your own home, but you like to see the world about you in a public place.

THE GREEN BOUGH

They worshipped God, those people in Bridnorth. Who could hope to maintain that they did not? They were close enough to Him in all conscience and fact on those Devon hills. But that worship was more in the silence of their own hearts, more on the floor at their own bedside than ever it was at the service conducted by the Vicar as so many services are conducted by so many Vicars in so many parishes throughout the length and breadth of the whole country.

The interest of seeing a fresh face, of even seeing an old face if it be under a new hat; the mere interest of human contact, of exchanging a word as they went in or mildly criticizing as they came out; the mild necessity of listening to what the Vicar said from the pulpit, the sterner necessity of trying to understand what he meant; the excitement of wearing a new frock, the speculations upon the new frock worn by another, these were more the causes of a good attendance in the worst of weather, these and that same consciousness of being overlooked, of having one's conduct under the gaze of all who chose to satisfy themselves about it.

As the Vicar climbed the pulpit steps, the congregation settled themselves down with that moving in their pews with all customary signs of that spirit of patience every priest believes to be one of interest. Leaning her square, strong shoulders against the upright back of the Throgmorton pew, Mary composed her mind with mild attention. Fanny shifted her hassock to the most restful position for her feet. That sharp interrogative look of criticism drew itself out in the line of

THE GREEN BOUGH

Jane's lips and steadied itself in her eyes. Hannah was the only one upon whose face a rapt expression fell. With all her gray hair and her forty years, she was the youngest of them all, still cherishing her ideals of the infallible priest in the man of cloth; still believing that the voice of God could speak even through the inferior brain of a country Vicar. Above all there were her children who the next morning would ask her what the sermon meant. It was necessary if only for their sakes she should not lose a word that was said.

After that pause on his knees when the Vicar's head was bent in prayer, he rose to his feet and, as he spread out the pages of his sermon before him, cast a significant glance around the church. This was preliminary to every sermon he preached. It was as though he said—"I cannot have any signs of inattention. If your minds have wandered at all during the service, they must wander no more. I feel I have got something to say which is vital to all of you."

All this happened that December morning, just as it had occurred every morning for the twenty years he had been the shepherd of their souls. It was almost as long as Mary could remember.

Having cast that glance about him, he cleared his throat—the same sounds as Jane once caustically remarked they had heard one thousand times, allowing two Sundays in the year for a *locum tenens*.

Then he gave out his text: "And the Angel said unto her—'Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favor with God.'"

IX

PERHAPS it was the sound of her own name there amongst all those people which stirred her mind and added a quicker beat of the pulse to Mary Throgmorton's heart. The full significance of the text, the circumstance to which it referred, these could not have reached her mind so swiftly, even though Fanny with a sharp turn of the head had looked at her.

“ ‘Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favor with God.’ ”

It was at first the sound of her name, the more as he repeated it. Listening to that habitual intonation of the Vicar's voice, it meant nothing to her as yet that Mary had found favor with her God. The only effect it had was the more completely to arrest her mind in a manner in which she had never been conscious of its arrest before. She folded her hands in her lap. It was a characteristic sign of attention in her. She folded her hands and raised her eyes steadily to the pulpit.

“ There are some things,” began the Vicar, “ which it is necessary for us to understand though they are completely outside the range of our comprehension.”

Involuntarily her interest was set back. It was the

THE GREEN BOUGH

delivery of such statements as these with which the Vicar had fed the mind of his congregation for the last twenty years. For how could one understand that which was completely outside the range of comprehension? Insensibly Mary's fingers relaxed as they lay in her lap. She drew a long breath of disappointment.

"The immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary," he continued, "is one of those mysteries in the teaching of the Church which passes comprehension but which it is expedient for us to understand, lest we be led away by it towards such false conceptions as are held by the Church of Rome."

There was scarcely a sermon he preached in which the Vicar lost opportunity for such attacks as these. He seemed to fear the Roman Catholic Church as a man fears the alluring attractions of an unscrupulous woman. From the eminence of his pulpit, he would have cursed it if he could and, firmly as she had been brought up to disapprove of the Romish doctrines, Mary often found in her mind a wonder of this fear of his, an inclination to suspect the power of the Roman Catholic Church.

From that moment, fully anticipating all they were going to be told, her mind became listless. She looked about her to see if the Mainwarings were in Church. Often there were moments in the sermon when she would catch the old General's eye which for her appreciation would lift heavenwards with a solemn expression of patient forbearance.

They lived too far out of Bridnorth. It was not to

THE GREEN BOUGH

be expected they would have walked all that distance in the snow. Her eyes had scarcely turned back from their empty pew when the Vicar's words arrested her again.

"Because Mary was the sinless mother of Our Lord," he was saying, "is no justification for us to direct our prayers to her. For this is what it is necessary for us to understand. It is necessary for us to understand that Mary was the mother of Our Lord's manhood. His divinity comes from God alone. What is the Trinity to which we attach our faith? It is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the three in one. Mary, the Virgin, has no place here and it is beyond this in our thoughts of worship we have no power or authority to go.

"The Roman Catholic Church claims the mediation of the Virgin Mary between the hearts of its people and the divine throne of God. Lest we should drift into such distress of error as that, let us understand the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, however much as a mystery we allow it to be beyond our comprehension. Being the Son of God, Christ must have been born without sin, yet being the Son of Man, He must, with His manhood, have shared all the inheritance of suffering which is the accompaniment of our earthly life. How else could He have been tempted in the Wilderness? How else could He have passed through His agony on the Cross?

"To what conclusion then are we thus led? It is to the conclusion that Mary, the Mother of that manhood

THE GREEN BOUGH

in Christ, must have suffered as all women suffer. She had found favor with God; but the Angel did not say she had found immunity from that nature which, being born in sin as are we all, was her inevitable portion.

“So, lest we fall into the temptation of raising her in dignity to the very throne of God, lest we succumb to the false teaching of those who would address their prayers to her, it becomes incumbent upon us to see the Virgin Mary in a clear and no uncertain light. Mystery in her conception there must always be, but in her giving birth in that manger of Bethlehem, it is as Mary the wife of Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, we must regard her.”

To all those present in the congregation this was no more than one of the many tirades the Vicar had so often preached against the Roman Catholic Church. They listened as they had always listened before, with patience but without interest. It was no real matter of concern to them. They had no desire to be converted. They had not in the silence of their homes been reading the works of Roman Catholic authorities as the Vicar had done. They did not entertain the spirit of rivalry or feel the sense of competition as he felt it. They listened because it was their duty to listen and one and all of them except Mary, thinking of their warm firesides, hoped that he would soon make an end.

Only Mary amongst them all sat now with heart and mind attentive to what he said, pursuing not the mean-

THE GREEN BOUGH

ing he intended to convey, but a train of thought, the sudden illumination of an idea which yet she dared not find words in her consciousness to express.

"We must think of her," the Vicar continued, "as a woman passing through the hours of her travail. We must think of her brought in secret haste by the fear of consequence and the expedience of necessity to that manger in Bethlehem, where, upon her bed of straw, with the cattle all about her in their stalls, she gave birth to a man child in all the suffering and all the pain it is the lot of women to endure. For here is the origin of that manhood in which we must place our faith if we are to appreciate the fullness of sacrifice our Savior made upon the Cross. It was a woman, as any one of you, who was the mother of Our Lord. A woman, blessed above all women to be the link between the divinity of God the Father and the manhood of God the Son. It *was* a woman who had found favor in the eyes of her Creator, such favor as had sought her out to be the instrument of the will and mercy of God.

"And the Angel said unto her — 'Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favor with God.'"

So often had Mary's name been repeated that by now no association was left in Fanny's mind with her sister. She turned and looked at her no more. But to Mary herself, with this last reiteration of all, the sound of it throbbed in every vein and beat in violent echoes in her heart. For now no longer could she keep back the conscious words that sought expression of those

THE GREEN BOUGH

thoughts in her mind. She knew beyond concealment the idea which had forced itself in a suspicion upon her acceptance.

In all his eagerness to lead their minds away from worship of the Virgin Mary, the Vicar had destroyed for her every shred of that mystery it had been his earnest intention to maintain. Now indeed it seemed she did understand and nothing was left that lay beyond her comprehension.

It was the woman, as he had urged them, whom she saw, the woman on her bed of straw, with that look in the eyes, the look of a woman waiting for her hour which often she had seen in the eyes of others it had been her duty to visit in Bridnorth. It was the woman, eager and suffering, with that eagerness she sometimes had felt as though it were a vision seen within herself. He had substituted a woman — just such a woman it might be as herself.

And here it was then that the thought leapt upon her like some ambushed thing, bearing her down beneath its weight; beating at her heart, lacerating her mind so that she knew she never in any time to come could hide from herself the scars it made.

“If she had suffered,” Mary asked herself — “must she not also have known?” And then, shaking her with the terror of its blasphemy, there sprang upon her mind the words —

“Who was the father of the Son of Man?”

“In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost!” a voice intoned in a far distance and

THE GREEN BOUGH

with all the others she rose automatically to her feet. Her eyes were glazed. She scarcely could see the Vicar as he descended from the pulpit. Her heart was thumping in her breast. She could hear only that.

X

THEY walked home in groups and in couples when the service was over. Only Fanny kept alone. A verse of poetry was building itself in her mind. One couplet already had formed a rounded phrase. It had been revolving in her thoughts all through the sermon. Round and about she had beaten it as with a pestle in a mortar until she had pounded it into shape.

“Were all the trees as green to you
As they were green to me?”

It was not so much what rhymed with “you” or “me” that was troubling her as what more she could continue to make the full matter of her verse. She could think of no more. The whole substance of life was summed up in those two lines to her. She walked alone that morning, cutting words to a measure that would not meet and had no meaning.

Mary walked with Jane. The sound of the voice and the laughter of others behind her in that sharp air was like the breaking of china falling upon a floor as hard as that beaten snow beneath their feet. She was still in an amaze with the bewilderment of what she had thought. Every long-trained sense in her was

THE GREEN BOUGH

horrified at the knowledge of its blasphemy. She tried to believe she had never thought it. To induce that belief, she would have persuaded herself if she could that the Vicar had never preached his sermon, that it was not to church they had been, that it was all a dream, horrible and more vivid than life itself, but a dream.

For life was peaceful and sweet enough there in Bridnorth. Notwithstanding the song the hoofs of the coach horses had always beaten out for her on the roads, she had been well content with it. Often doubtless the call of life had come to her there beyond the hill; it came with its cry of pain and joy, its voice of sorrow as well as happiness. But now, here amongst the peace and the sweetness, where none of these vital contrasts had ever existed, there had come something more terrible than pain, more cruel and relentless than sorrow.

In moments she was astonished at herself that she did not dismiss it all with one sweep of her mind, dismiss it all as lies and blasphemy, as machinations of the Devil himself. For what was the good just of telling herself it was a dream, of pretending to hide her thoughts from it as though it were not there? It was there! She had thought it and so had the thought come to her like a light suddenly in dark corners, that she knew it was true. Never now could she cast out its significance from the processes of her mind. In the desperate fear that the very foundations of her religious beliefs were shaken, she might buttress her

THE GREEN BOUGH

faith with the determined exclusion of all blasphemy in her thoughts. Never again might she allow her mind to dwell upon the origin of the manhood of that figure of Christ, still dearer to her than life itself. With persistent effort of will, she knew she could make blind her vision of that scene in the manger at Bethlehem which the Vicar in his ignorance and the pettiness of his apprehensions had conjured forth so clearly in her sight.

All this she might do, clinging to the faith in which she had been brought up; but never could she efface the change which in those few moments had been made in her. How could she know so soon what that change might be? She knew only it was there. She was a different being. Already she felt apart and aloof from her sisters. Even Jane, walking there beside her, appeared at a strange distance in which was a clearer light for her to see by, a crystal atmosphere through which she could distinguish nothing but the truth.

Suddenly as they walked together, these two in silence, Jane looked up and said —

“I wish some one would kill that bee in the Vicar’s bonnet. As if there was the slightest chance of any of us becoming Roman Catholics!”

It was like Jane, that remark. Suddenly Mary knew how like it was. But more she knew in that moment the change had not come to her sisters. They had not seen what she had seen. No vision such as hers had been vouchsafed to them. Still they were happy, contented, and at peace in their garden of Eden.

THE GREEN BOUGH

It was she alone who had tasted of the fruit; she alone who now had knowledge of good and evil.

Already she felt the edge of the sword of the angel of God turned against her. The gates of that garden they lived in were opened. In the deep consciousness of her heart she felt she was being turned away. How it would difference her life, where she should go now that she had been driven forth, what even the world outside those gates might be, she did not know.

All she realized was that for twenty-nine years a Mary Throgmorton had been living in Bridnorth, that now she had gone and another Mary Throgmorton had taken her place.

Looking down at Jane beside her when she spoke, she saw for the first time a sad figure of a woman, shrivelled and dried of heart, bitter and resentful of mind. No longer was she the Jane who, with her sharp tongue, had often made them laugh, who, with her shrewd criticisms had often shown them their little weaknesses and the pettiness of their thoughts. In place of her she saw a woman wilted and seared, a body parched with the need of the moisture of life; one who had been cut from the tree to wither and decay, one, the thought then sprang upon her, who had never found favor with God or man.

XI

THEY came loitering to the square, white house, pausing at the gate and talking to friends, lingering over the removal of their goloshes indoors. The crisp air was in their lungs. There was the scent of cooking faintly in the hall. It rose pleasantly in their nostrils. They laughed and chatted like a nestful of starlings. Jane was more amusing than usual. Her comments upon the hat bought by the police sergeant's wife in Exeter and worn that Sunday morning for the first time were shrewd and close of observation; too close to be kind, yet so shrewd as to prick even the soft heart of Hannah to laughter she would have restrained if she could.

Even Fanny, with mind still beating out her meters, lost that far-off look in her eyes and lingered in the hall to listen to Jane's sallies, to every one of which Hannah would murmur between her laughter —

"Jane! Jane — how can you? Fancy your noticing that! Oh dear! we oughtn't to be laughing at all. Poor thing! She can't help her eye or her figure."

"If I were fat," said Jane, "I wouldn't go in stripes. You don't put hoops round a barrel to make it look thin."

Foolish though that might have sounded in London

THE GREEN BOUGH

drawing-rooms, it found a burst of laughter in the square, white house.

On her knees above, upstairs in her bedroom, Mary heard the noise of it. She could guess well the kind of remark from Jane that had evoked it. Until those moments Jane had been a source of amusement to her as much as to any of them. She was a source of amusement no longer. Even there on her knees with the sound of their laughter far away in the distance of the house, it was that sad figure of a woman, shrivelled and dried, bitter with the need of sun to ripen her, that came before her eyes.

Then what were the others? With this new vision, she dreaded to think that she in time must look at them. What thoughts to have on one's knee! What thoughts to bring into the sight and mind of God!

She had come there alone to her bedroom to pray — but what for? How could prayer help? Could she by prayer make numb and dead the motion of her mind? By prayer could she silence her thoughts, inducing oblivion as a drug could induce sleep?

Hastening away alone to her bedroom, she had hoped she could. Even then she cherished the belief of all she had been taught of the efficacy of prayer. But having fallen upon her knees at her bedside, what could she pray? Nothing.

"Oh — God, my heavenly Father," she began, and staring before her with rigid eyes at the pillow on her bed it became a twisted bundle of straw on which for

THE GREEN BOUGH

poor comfort rested the pale face of a woman patient and enduring in her hour.

How could prayer put away such visions as these? With conscious muscular effort she closed her eyes and began repeating in a voice her ears could hear — “Our Father which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name.”

So she would have decoyed herself into the attitude of mind of prayer, but the sound of laughter in the house broke in upon the midst of it. She saw that thin, withered woman in whom the sap of life had dried to pith, and, casting away the formula of supplication, her voice had cried out for understanding of it all.

“Something’s all wrong!” she said aloud as though one were there in the room beside her to hear and oppose her accusations. “I don’t know what it is. I’ve never thought it was wrong before. And perhaps after all it’s I who am wrong.”

She knew what she meant by that. Wrong she might insist it was for her to have thought what she thought in church. And yet some quality of deliberation seemed necessary to compose the substance of evil. What deliberation had there been in her? Out of the even and placid monotony of life had shrilled this voice into her heart.

“Who was the father of the Son of Man?”

She had not beckoned the voice. It had lifted out of nowhere above the soulless intonation of the Vicar’s sermon. But what was more, now once she had heard

THE GREEN BOUGH

it, it appeared as though it long had been waiting to cry its message in her ears. She wondered why she had never heard it before. For twenty-nine years she realized as she knelt there on her knees, she had been little more than a child. Now in the lateness of the day she was a woman, knowing more of the world than ever she would have learnt by experience.

The deeper purposes of life they were that had come without seeking upon her imagination. It was not this or that she knew about women, not this or that which had come in revelation to her about men. Only that there was a meaning within herself, pitiably and almost shamefully unfulfilled. Something there was wrong — all wrong. Half she suspected in herself what it was. For those few moments as they walked back from church, she had caught actual sight of it in her sister Jane.

Would she discern it in the others? Discovering it in them would she know what it was in her? Why was she on her knees for thoughts like this? This was not prayer. She could not pray.

The sound of the bell downstairs raised her slowly to her feet. She took off her hat and laid it on the bed. Automatically she crossed to the mirror and began to tidy her hair.

Was there anything in her face that made her heart beat the faster? She stood looking at her reflection, pondering that there was not. What beauty of color was there in her cheeks? What line of beauty in her lips? And why did she look for these things and why,

THE GREEN BOUGH

when behind her eyes she saw something in her mind she dared not speak, did her heart set up a beating in every pulse?

With a gesture of impatient self-rebuke, she turned away and went downstairs.

XII

JANE carved. As their father had always done, she still gave them just portions of fat so that the joint might evenly be consumed. There was not the same necessity to eat it when it was hot as there had been when Mr. Throgmorton was alive; yet even still, Fanny with an unconquerable distaste for it, did her best to leave a clean plate.

When Mary came in, they were already seated at the table. Hannah had said grace. They all asked where she had been.

“Tidying up,” said she, and pulling out her chair, sat down, beginning her meal at once with her eyes steady upon her plate. Fanny was opposite to her. Being the eldest, Hannah sat at the head of the table. With the new vision of mind that had come to her, there were long moments before Mary could determine to raise her head and look at them. It was sufficient to hear them talking. The subject of Christmas presents was monopolizing the conversation. They were all going in to Exeter for a day’s shopping if the roads permitted. Mary found herself caught in astonishment at the apparent note of happiness in their voices.

Were they happy after all? Had she herself become morbid and supersensitive with the sudden unex-

THE GREEN BOUGH

pectedness of her revelation? Was it all a mood? Would she wake on the morrow after a night of sleep, finding the whole aspect of life set back again to its old focus?

In a sudden hope and expectancy that it might be so, she raised her head and looked across the table at Fanny seated there with the full light of the window on her face.

It was a moment when, in a pause of the conversation, Fanny's thoughts had slipped back to the labor of her verses.

"Were ever the trees so green to you
As they were green to me?"

The strained expression of fretted composition was settled on her forehead. The far-off look of a memory clutching at the past was a pain in her eyes. In every outline and feature of her pale, thin face were the unmistakable signs of the utter weariness of her soul.

In that one glance, Mary knew her vision was true. It was no mood. All those signs of fatigue she had seen in Fanny's face again and again. It was her health, she had often said to herself. Fanny was not strong. Ill-health it might have been, but the root of the evil was in her spirit, not in her blood.

Sitting there opposite, as in all the countless times from childhood upwards she had seen her, it was another Fanny — the real Fanny — she beheld, just as she knew now it was the real Jane. These three sis-

THE GREEN BOUGH

ters of hers, suddenly they had all become real. Hannah with her heart more in the flow of the Bridnorth stream, to the smooth round edges of contentment, each one of them in her turn they were presented with their new significance in her eyes.

But it was Fanny most of all in whom she felt full sense of the tragedy of circumstance. That episode of the visitor to Bridnorth came now with a fresh meaning upon Mary's mind. They had all felt deeply sorry for Fanny at the time, but one and all they had agreed she had had a lucky escape.

Was it such a lucky escape after all? Did Fanny regard it in that light? Could they be considered fortunate who escaped from life however it might wound and ill-treat them?

Mary realized as she sat there, fascinated by the terribleness of her thoughts, that they all had escaped from life. Not in one of them had there been the moment's fulfillment of their being. They were women, but it was not as women they had lived. One by one the purpose of life was running slower in their veins. She with the rest of them. Her turn would come. First she would become a Fanny, tired with waiting. That eager look of a spirit hunger would come into her eyes, alternating as events came and passed her by with those dull, dead shadows of fatigue. Hope she would cling to as a blind man to the string that is knotted to the collar of his dog. Hope, becoming fainter and weaker year by year, would lead her until, as with Jane, bitter and seared and dry of heart, she

THE GREEN BOUGH

sought its services no more. Still like the blind man then she would beat with her stick up and down the unchanging pavements of her life till at last with Hannah she found a numbed contentment in her lot.

Something indeed, as she had cried up there alone in her room, something was wrong. She had come as just a few women do to that conscious realization. But her vision had not power to show her what it was. In those moments it never occurred to her to raise her eyes to the portrait of her father on the wall. She was not didactic enough of mind to argue it with herself or trace the origin of those conventions which had bound and still were binding the lives of those three women her eyes were watching.

Something was wrong. Vaguely she sensed it was the waste of life. It was beyond the function of her mind to follow the reason of that wastage to its source. Her process of thought could not seek out the social laws that had woven themselves about the lives of women until, so much were they the slaves of the law, that they would preach it, earnestly, fervently, believably as her mother had done.

Something was wrong. That was just all she knew; but in those moments, she knew it well. There were those three women about her to prove how wrong it was. There was she herself nearing that phase when the wrong would be done to her, and she would be powerless as they had been to prevent it.

“Fear not, Mary —” it was as though she heard a

THE GREEN BOUGH

voice beckoning within her —“ Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favor with God.”

Ever since they had come to an age of understanding, their spirits had been warped and twisted with the formalities of life. To fit the plan of those laws man makes by force, they had been bent in their growing to the pattern of his needs. It was those needs of his that had invented the forced virtues of their modesty and self-respect, beneath the pressure of which he kept them as he required them, trained and set back to fulfill the meaning of his self-centered purpose.

Modesty and self-respect, surely these were qualities of all, of men as well as women. By unnatural temperatures to force them in their growth was to produce exotic flowers having none of the simple sweetness of sun-given odors in their scent.

As life was meant, it grew in the open spaces ; it was an upright tree, spreading its green boughs under the pure light of heaven. There was nothing artificial about life. It was free.

It was the favor of God. That was the truth she had come by and with her eyes marking that weary look of resignation in Fanny's face, she knew she would not fear it whenever or however it came.

This was the seed, planted in the heart of Mary Throgmorton, which in its season was to bring forth and, for the life of the woman she was, bear the fruit of her being.

PHASE II

IT was in the summer of 1895 that Julius Liddiard came to Bridnorth. He came alone, having engaged rooms at the White Hart.

From the Throgmorton windows he was observed descending at the George Hotel when, with a glance at Mary, it was announced by Jane that he played golf. As he slung a bulky satchel over his shoulder, Fanny surmised him to be an artist, entertaining for a swift moment as it sped across her mind, a vision of herself sitting beside him, watching his sketches with absorbing interest as they came to life beneath his brush.

It remained with Jane to make the final observation as, accompanied by a man carrying his trunk, he passed the windows on his way back to the White Hart.

"Has his suit case polished," she said. "He's not an artist. Paints for fun. Probably has a valet. Too wealthy for the likes of Bridnorth. Comes here to be alone."

If judging the facts of appearance leads to a concept of truth, these observations of Jane were shrewdly accurate. Time, during the first week, proved the soundness of their deduction.

He was seen by Fanny on the cliff's edge above the bay, painting with pleasing amateurish results and so

THE GREEN BOUGH

engrossed in his work as scarcely to notice her presence. She had looked over his shoulder as she passed. She was no critic but had, what is more common to find, the candor of ill-formed opinion.

"It was not bad," she said—"rather slobbery. It was running all over the paper. P'raps he pulls it together. Course I didn't stop."

Jane's eyes narrowed. It was superfluous to say she did not stop. That was one of Fanny's lies; one of the lies all women tell which record their conscious intentions while they belie the subconscious things they do. She had not meant to stop. It was obvious to Jane that she did. Her next words proved it.

"Can't understand," she said, "how any one can become so engrossed, messing about with paints on a piece of paper."

She had stopped and he had not noticed her.

After a week had passed, Mary came back one evening from the golf club. They were all having tea.

"His name's Liddiard," she said casually in the midst of a silence, and they all knew to whom she alluded and what had occurred.

Questions poured upon her then from all but Hannah, who went on eating her pieces of bread and butter, letting her eyes wander from one to another as they spoke.

She informed them of all she had gathered about him during their game of golf, but gave her information only under pressure of their questioning.

THE GREEN BOUGH

Ever since her eyes had penetrated the veil that for so long had hidden her sisters from her, Mary had resented, while so well she understood, their curiosity about the visitors who came to Bridnorth. There were times when it almost had a savor of indecency to her; times when she felt her cheeks grow warm at the ill-hidden purpose of their interest; times when it seemed to her as though Fanny, revealing her soul, had dressed it in diaphanous garments which almost were immodest in their transparent flimsiness.

She knew Fanny's soul now. She knew the souls of all of them. She knew her own and often she prayed that however Fate might treat her, even if as it now treated them, she still would keep it secret and hidden from eyes that were not meant to see.

"He comes from Somerset," she told them. "He has a large estate there. Something like two thousand acres and I suppose a big house. No — does nothing. I expect looking after a place like that is work enough. Farms himself, I believe — the way he speaks about it. Yes — married."

Jane thought the annoyance with which she gave it out was upon her own account. There was a smile in her eyes when Mary admitted it, as though her rejoinder might have been — "What a suck for you."

Such good nature as she had kept the words from utterance. But as well it was that Mary's annoyance had really had nothing to do with herself. Their question, chimed from Fanny and Jane together, had made the blood tingle in her cheeks. Why did they expose

THE GREEN BOUGH

themselves like that? She would sooner have seen them with too short a skirt or too low a bodice. Scarcely conscious of this shame in Mary, it yet had had power to hold back the words from Jane's lips. Nevertheless she credited it to her virtue.

"They say I'm bitter," she thought. "They don't know how bitter I could be."

"Why isn't his wife with him?" she asked.

Mary professed complete indifference and ignorance.

"Do you suppose I asked him?" she said. "Marriage isn't a grazing in one field, is it? Life isn't one acre to everybody."

How interestingly he must have talked about his estate and farming. That came leaping at once into Jane's mind. A grazing in one field — that was a new-learned phrase for Mary. There was little she knew about grazing and could not tell an acre from a rood.

"How does he play golf?" she inquired.

"Fairly well."

"How many strokes did he give you?"

"None — we played level."

"What did he win by?"

"I did — two and one."

"So you're going to play again?"

"Well, of course. It was a tight match."

Jane rose from the table to go and make out the linen for the laundry. Fanny sat staring at the tea leaves in the bottom of her cup. Hannah inquired in her gentle voice if any one wanted the last piece of bread and butter.

II

IT was a closer observation than she knew when Jane said that Julius Liddiard came to Bridnorth to be alone.

He was a lonely man. There is that condition of loneliness more insuperable than others, the loneliness of mind in a body surrounded by the evidences of companionship. In this condition he suffered, unable to explain, unable to express.

Much as he loved it, in his own home at times he felt a stranger, whose presence within its walls was largely upon sufferance. Mastery, he claimed, exacting the purpose of his will, but in the very consciousness that it must be forced upon those about him, he felt his loneliness the more.

Authority was not his conception of a home. He had looked for unity, but could not find it. His wife and her sister who lived with them, the frequent visits of their friends and relations, these were the evidences of a companionship that served merely to drive him further and deeper into the lonely companionship of himself.

She had her right to life, he was forced in common justice to tell himself, and if she chose the transitory gayeties, finding more substance of life in a late night

THE GREEN BOUGH

in London than an early morning on Somersetshire downs, that was her view of things to which she was fully entitled.

Of his own accord, he had invited her sister to live with them, seeking to please her; hoping to please himself. She made her home there. It was too late actually to turn her away when he had discovered the habit of her life was an incurable laziness which fretted and jarred against the energies of his mind.

"We make our lives," he said, enigmatically to Mary, that first day when they were playing golf. "Lord knows what powers direct us. I may make the most perfect approach on to this green, but nothing on earth can tell me exactly which way the ball is going to kick."

He had approached his life with all the precision of which he was capable, but the kick had come and it had come the wrong way. There was no accounting for its direction. It was obvious to him he could not see the world through his wife's eyes. After some years it had become no less obvious that she could not see it through his.

He wandered through the rooms of his own house, a stranger to the sounds of meaningless laughter that echoed there. He took his walking-stick, called a dog and strode out on to the downs, glad to be in fact alone.

Gradually such laughter as there was in him — he had his full share of it — died out of him. Much as he loved his wife, much as she loved him, he knew he

THE GREEN BOUGH

was becoming more and more of a disappointment to her. In the keener moments of consciousness of his loneliness, she found him morose, until, unable to sing or laugh with the songs and laughter of that house, he came at times to believe he was morose himself.

"What's happening to me," he would say when he was alone; "what's happening to me is that I'm losing the joy of life."

Yet the sight of the countryside at Springtime seemed to himself to give him more sense of joy than all the revels in London that made his wife's eyes dance with youth.

He had laughed inordinately once; had won her heart by the compound of his spirits, grave and gay. It was quite true when she accused him of becoming too serious-minded. He heard the absence of his laughter and sometimes took himself away and alone that she might notice it the less.

There were times when it seemed she had lost all touch with his mind that once had interested her. He took his mind away and left his heart there at Wenlock Hall behind him.

What can happen with a man's mind when he holds it alone in his keeping is what happened to Julius Liddiard.

Jane was more accurate than she knew when she declared that he had come to Bridnorth to be alone.

It was his intention to sketch and play golf with the professional until such time as the longing for his

THE GREEN BOUGH

home again would urge him back with a mind ready to ignore its disappointments in the joy of mating and meeting with his heart again.

Upon his first appearance on the golf links, the professional had disappointed him. Mary Throgmorton had stepped into the breach, recommended by the secretary as being able to give him as good a game as many of the members.

For the first half, they had played with little interchange of conversation. As they left the ninth green, she was two up. Then he had looked at her with an increasing interest, seeing what most men saw, the strong shoulders, the straight line of her back, the full strength of her figure, the firm stance she took as she played her game.

It was not until after the game was over and they sat at tea in the Club Room, that he noticed her face with any interest. Had this observation been denied him, he would have gone away from Bridnorth, describing her as a girl of the country, bred on sea air; the type of mother for sons of Englishmen, if ever she found her proper mate.

But across that tea-table, his mind saw more. He saw in flashes of expression out of the gray eyes that faced him, that soul which Mary had only so lately discovered in herself. He saw a range of emotion that could touch in its flight the highest purpose; he heard in her voice the laughter his mind could laugh with, the thoughts his mind could think with.

"Well, we've had a good game," he had said

THE GREEN BOUGH

steadily. "Do you think I've a chance of beating you if we play again to-morrow?"

"I like to win," said she, "if there's a chance of being beaten. I expect you'll beat me next time. You don't know the course yet."

"We'll play to-morrow," he said.

And it had been arranged.

III

THIS time they played in the morning. They had a simple lunch of boiled eggs such as the Club provided. It was a common occurrence for Mary to stay on the links all day.

Hannah thought nothing of her absence at the mid-day meal. Fanny thought a great deal, but said no word. Jane, thinking little, casually questioned why it was always married men who came to Bridnorth.

"And invariably married men who play golf," she added. Indeed in those days the younger men somewhat left the game to their elders. "I believe Mary's a bit of a fool," she went on. "If she really wanted to marry, she'd play tennis or sit on the beach at bathing time. That girl Hyland got married last year throwing pebbles at an old bottle. We've all thought marriage was a serious business. That was the way they brought us up." She looked at her mother's portrait. "That's what's been all wrong with us. It isn't the one who sits quietest who's chosen. It's the one who fusses about and chooses for herself. You've got to be able to throw pebbles at glass bottles now. Crochet hooks aren't any good. All our chances have been lost in two purl and one plain. It's their fault, both of them — it's their fault."

THE GREEN BOUGH

Jane spoke so terribly near the truth sometimes that it was agony for those others to listen to her. To Hannah it was sacrilege almost, against the spirit of those still ruling in that house. To Fanny it was no sacrilege. She too knew it had been their fault. But the truth of it was a whip, driving her, not that she forgot her fatigue, but so as to urge her on, stumbling, feeling the hope in her heart like harness wearing into the flesh.

Almost visibly she aged as she listened. Her expression drooped. Her eyes fixed in a steady gaze upon Jane's face while she was speaking as though the weight of lead were holding them from movement.

"Don't speak like that, Jane!" Hannah exclaimed. "How can you say it's their fault? They did the very best they knew for us. Wouldn't you sooner be as you are than like that girl Hyland?"

"She's got a baby now," Jane replied imperturbably. "She'll steady down. She's contributed more than we have. It isn't much when all you can say is that you've given a few old clothes to jumble sales."

"I know what Jane means," said Fanny. Her memory had caught her back to that late evening on the cliffs when she felt again, like an internal wound, that sparseness of her body in the arms which for those few moments had held her close. "I know what Jane means," she repeated, and rose from the table, leaving the room, not waiting for her coffee.

At the Golf Club over their boiled eggs and the gritty coffee while Liddiard smoked, they talked of Wenlock

THE GREEN BOUGH

Hall, the history of it, the farm and lands surrounding it, the meaning that it had for him.

"How many children have you?" asked Mary.

"None," said he.

It was a question as to whether they should play the final match that afternoon. Each had won a game.

"Why get through good things all at once?" said he. "That's a sky for sketching — my sort of amiable sketching. The view across the bay from that Penlock hill will be wonderful."

Her readiness to part with his company for the afternoon was simple and genuine.

"Of course," she said, "you're here for a holiday. I was getting selfish. I don't often get a good game, you see. We've plenty of opportunity if, as you say, you don't go till next week."

"Oh, I meant you to come if you would," he explained quickly. "Not much fun, I know. But there's the walk out there and back and I like being talked to while I'm painting. Not much of a conversationalist then, I admit. I'm doing all the selfishness — but one doesn't often get the chance of being talked to — as you talk."

It was the first time she had ever been told that any power of interesting conversation was hers. She felt a catch of excitement in her breath. When she answered him, she could not quite summon her voice to speak on a casual note. It sounded muffled and thick, as though her heart were beating in her throat and she

THE GREEN BOUGH

had to speak through it. Yet she was not conscious that it was.

"I'll come if you really want me to," she said, and her acceptance was neither eager nor restrained. She went as freely as she walked and she walked with a loose, swinging stride. It became a mental observation with him as they climbed the cliff path, that their steps fell together with even regularity.

His sketch was a failure. The atmosphere defied him, or the talk they made distracted his mind. He threw the block face downwards on the grass.

"Oh! why do you do that?" she asked, regretting consciously that which she did not know she was glad of—"It looked as if it were going to be so nice."

"It had got out of hand," said he. "They do, so often. I know when I can't pull 'em together. Besides, talking's better, isn't it? You can't give your whole interest to two things at once."

How long had they known each other? Two days—less! He felt he had been talking to her constantly, over a long period of time. She knew he felt that and was kept in wonder as to what her interest could be to him.

Once definitely having put his sketch out of his mind, he lay back on the close, sharp-bitten grass, looking no more across the bay, but talking to Mary about herself. Tentative and restrained as his questions were, they sought her out. She felt no desire for concealment, but sat there, upright, as one would most times find her, drawing a thread of sea grass backwards and for-

THE GREEN BOUGH

wards through her fingers, answering the questions he asked, sometimes briefly, sometimes with far excursion into her mind, expressing thoughts she scarcely had been conscious of till then.

"You make me a great egotist," she said presently, with a laugh.

"Isn't yours the age for egotism?" he answered. "Why shouldn't you think about yourself when you're young, and all's in front of you? When you come up with it you'll have no time."

"When I'm young," she laughed. "You'd better guess how old I am," and she laughed again, knowing what Hannah or Jane would think to hear her.

"I don't want to guess," said he. "Suppose you were twenty-eight — or even thirty, I say all's in front of you. That's your age. That's the impression you give me."

"I'm twenty-nine," said she, and her eyebrow lifted with suppressed laughter as he sat up in his surprise to look at her.

"Twenty-nine?" he repeated. "What have you been doing with your life? Why are you here, playing an occasional game of golf, attending mothers' meetings, going to your little church every Sunday to listen to that fool of a parson you have? It's waste — waste — utter waste!"

"Have you ever thought how many women do waste in the world?" she asked and then of a sudden felt the hot sweep of blood into her face. How had it happened she had come to talk to a man and a stranger like

THE GREEN BOUGH

this? Yet wasn't it true, and wasn't there some sort of exciting satisfaction in saying it? She could not have said that to Hannah, to Jane, not even to Fanny. Why was it possible to exchange such intimate thoughts with a man and he, an utter stranger she had met only the day before?

Suddenly, in the speaking of that thought, she had learnt something about herself and not herself only but about all women and the whole of life. All that her mother had taught her was wrong. Concealment, deception, fraud, these were not the outward symbols of modesty. Just as for the ailments of her body she could not have gone to a woman doctor, so with the smoldering fever of her inmost thoughts, it was only to a man she could speak.

Then did men understand? With the rest of her sex she had always argued that they did not. If it was not for understanding, then why had she spoken? It must be that they understood; but not with their minds, not cruelly, scorchingly, calculatingly, as women did, judging shrewdly the relation between character and the fact confided, but more spiritually than this; the inner meaning, the deeper purpose, relating that confidence to the soul of the woman who made it, rather than to her conduct.

In that moment she had learnt the indefinable complement between the sexes. In that moment, Mary Throgmorton had for the first time in her life answered to the cry of Nature calling mate to mate.

THE GREEN BOUGH

The heat of the blood lifted in temperature in her cheeks as she came upon her knowledge, but he said nothing of the flush that lingered in them. A woman would have noticed that and to her shrewd observation they would have burnt the more. As he sat there, not looking at her, but staring through the pine trees across the bay, she found a feeling of comfort in being with him as her cheeks grew cool again.

Never looking at her, he asked if women were conscious of that sense of waste, and the tone of his voice was neither searching nor inquisitive. It had no suggestion of personal curiosity behind it. He spoke from inside himself, from inner purposes and from the inner purposes within herself she answered him, feeling no sense of restraint.

"Do you imagine they wouldn't be?" she replied. "Not perhaps in their everyday life, but in moments in those days when even in a crowd you suddenly drop out of existence, like a star falling, and find yourself alone. Of course they feel it. Every energy of man it seems to me has been to keep women from the touch of life. But sometimes they find a loophole and get out and find the sense of it, if it's only in the tips of their fingers. They may be only moments, but every woman has them."

She had never talked like this to any one before. Had there been any one to talk to? Would she have spoken to them in such a fashion if there had? It was only since that sermon, the Christmas before, she had

THE GREEN BOUGH

been aware such thoughts were in the composition of her mind and never had they expressed themselves so definitely as this.

Yet her wonder was more of him than of herself. Until that moment she could never have believed a man could have understood. And it was not from what he said that she felt he did. He was sitting up now and he was nursing his knees as he gazed out across the bay towards Kingsnorth. It was in the abstract penetration of his gaze, the silence about him as he listened that she sensed his understanding.

Yet had she known it, he was thinking more of himself than of her. Something echoed in him with all she had said. It was not that he had never gained, but that he had lost his touch with life. The spirit in him was wandering and alone and it had chanced upon hers, wandering also.

This sense of mutual understanding was merely the call of Nature. The hazard of all things had tumbled them together in the crowd of the world. Something had touched. They knew it that second day. She was answering some purpose in him — he in her. And the explanation that Nature vouchsafed to her was that he understood women; and the explanation that Nature vouchsafed to him was that he was beginning to understand himself, and that there was much in him that needed much in her.

It was too soon to think that. It was too upheaving.

THE GREEN BOUGH

He rose quickly to his feet, saying, half under his breath, but loud enough for her to hear, "It's odd — it's all odd."

And she knew what he meant.

IV

THE bay at Bridnorth is inclosed by two headlands of sandy stone. That to the east rises irregularly with belts of pine wood and sea-bent oaks, opening later in heathered moors that stretch in broad plateaus, then sink to sheltered hollows where one farm at least lies hidden in its clump of trees.

It is always a romantic world, that land which lies to the cliff edge beside the sea. The man who farms it is forever at close grips with the elements. He wrestles with Nature as those inland with their screening hedgerows have little knowledge of. The hawthorn and the few scattered trees that grow, all are trained by the prevailing winds into fantastic shapes no hand of man can regulate. Sheep may do well upon those windy pastures, but the cattle, ever at hiding in the hollows, wear a weather-beaten look. Crops are hazardous ventures and, like the sower, scattering his grain, must plant their feet full firmly in the soil if they would stand until their harvest time against the winds that sweep up from the sea.

Up through the belt of pine wood and across the heathered moors, Mary came often those days with her friend. The views from countless places called for his

THE GREEN BOUGH

brush. Once she had brought him there to show him her Devon, he sought the golf links no more. They never played their final match.

On the first two occasions of their excursions beyond Penlock Hill, he painted assiduously. Mary brought a book and read. Long whiles between her reading she watched him, smiling, when, with almost childish distress, he assured her he had done pictures that at least were worth glancing at in a portfolio, if not a permanent frame.

For either it was, as in the first instance, that the atmosphere of a strange country defeated him and tricked his sense of color, or his mind was bent on other things, but both days were fruitless of results. On each of these occasions, as before, he threw the sketches down, unfinished, and fretted at his lack of skill.

"This Devon of yours," said he, "has got more color than I can get out of my box. What really is the matter is that it has more color than I've got in my eyes. If it's not in your eyes, it's not in your box. You can't squeeze a green field out of a tube of oxide of chromium. Paint's only the messenger between you and Nature."

Her sympathy was real. Notwithstanding that it gave her more of his attention, she fretted for him too. When the next day they met at the foot of Penlock Hill and she found him without his satchel, she was genuinely disappointed and unhappy.

"Aren't you sufficiently selfish," he asked, "to be

THE GREEN BOUGH

sensible of the obvious fact that I'd far sooner talk to you than spend my time in useless efforts?"

"Perhaps it isn't in the nature of women to be really selfish," she said, with a laugh to lighten her meaning.

That set them at discussion upon the comparative selfishness of the sexes as they mounted the hill and took the beaten path across the heather.

For a man, he had strange points of view to her. With an honest bitterness, he complained about the selfishness of men.

"But what else can we be?" said he. "As things are, what else can we be? We run the world and this civilization's our conception of the measures on which it has to be run, and this civilization is built up on a solid rock of egotism and selfishness, with brute force to insist upon the upholding of the standard. I wonder what would happen," he went on, "if fair women, as Meredith visioned, rose in revolt. I wonder what would happen if they suddenly combined to refuse to give the world the material it builds its civilization with. I wonder where our brute force would come in then. What sort of children should we have if women had to be taken by brute force? And should we so take them if really they were to resist? Brute force has been opposed only with brute force. Our highest conception is that the strongest brute force wins. I wonder what brute force would do if it were opposed with the force of the spiritual ideals that women have and scarcely are awake to even yet. Are you awake to the spiritual ideals in you?"

THE GREEN BOUGH

He looked at her suddenly as they walked and as suddenly and as firmly she said —

“Yes.”

“By Jove!” he exclaimed. “You’re the first woman I’ve ever met who would have answered as straight and direct as that. All the rest would have hedged and shilly-shallied. Some would have giggled. Half of them would frankly not have known what I meant.”

“I know very well what you mean,” she replied. “But if you’re surprised at a woman knowing, I don’t think you’re any more surprised than I am at a man asking the question. How did you know to begin with that women have spiritual ideals at all, strong enough ever to think of their being ranged against brute force?”

She paused, but it was so obvious she had still more to say that he waited rather than interrupt the train of her thought.

“I expect your wife’s a very wonderful woman,” she said.

In that pause she had wrestled with herself.

It had been the first time she had mentioned his wife in all their conversation. Well she knew what would be the effect of it. It would call her there between them. Inevitably it would thrust him a little away from her to give his wife room in their minds.

It had been an irresistible thought, yet why should she spoil the contact of mind between them by speak-

THE GREEN BOUGH

ing it? Was it incumbent upon her in any way to remind him of his wife?

Yet partly she was curious to know, and wholly she was honest to speak. There was his wife. Nothing in Mary's thoughts would be reckoned without her. Did he find a deep interest in speaking to her? She believed he did, but there was his wife. She knew there was no attraction of physical beauty in her, yet had he not made it obvious in the last ten days that still she had attraction for him? It seemed certain to her that he had; but there was his wife.

At every turn in their conversation, at the end of every steadied glance, this woman she had never seen effected some intervention in thought or vision in Mary's mind. More plainly a thousand times it seemed she felt her presence than did he. There were moments when enthusiasm caught him and it appeared he had forgotten every one and everything but Mary there before him.

It became imperative then for her to summon that vision before her mind. She did it with an effort. But later, when alone at night before she turned to sleep, it came without call, trembling her with emotion at the thought that a moment might happen upon them when they would both forget or come to memory too late.

And what did she mean by that — too late? In all frankness and honesty, she did not know. It were better explained, she would not allow herself to know. Reaching that issue in her conscious thought about it

THE GREEN BOUGH

all, emotion would sweep like a hot wind upon her. She would lie, half trembling in the darkness, pressing her hand upon her breast to frighten herself into some sort of terrible joy at the rapid beating of her heart and then, driving all conscious thought away from her, she would straighten her limbs in the bed, exerting her physical control, as when she nerved herself to play her game, thus forcing herself to quietude and ultimately to sleep.

So she came always consciously to a point of thought which, bringing her the vision of his wife and the sense of her own emotion, drifted her towards that subconsciousness of being wherein the pattern of so many a woman's life is made. She thought no more but, had she permitted it, would have lain, silent-minded in an ecstasy. It was no less than physical control, the straightening of her limbs, the clenching of her hands, the beating of her pillow into new resting places for her head, that put the ecstasy away.

Here, in some likeness, was that same moment, in the broad light of day with him beside her and the crisp heather roots beneath their feet. It was almost a physical effort in her throat that gave her strength to say —

“I expect your wife's a very wonderful woman.”

She meant him to realize that in her thoughts it was through his wife he had become possessed of such knowledge about women; that there was his wife; that she was there between them; that if he had for the instant forgotten her, she had not. It was as though,

THE GREEN BOUGH

in a violent muscular effort, Mary had seized her by the wrist and jerked her into step with them. Almost was she catching for her breath when she had done it.

"My wife is a wonderful woman," said he quietly. "She has as big a heart as all this stretch of acres and that breadth of sea, but to-day is her to-morrow. I didn't learn about the spiritual ideals of women from her."

"Where did you learn it then?" asked Mary.

"Now you're asking me something I couldn't possibly tell you," said he, and then he smiled. He had seen the look leap slanting across her eyes as she thought of the other woman who had taught him.

"Because," he added — "I don't know."

V

IF it were Fanny who first had sense of what was happening, it was Jane who, when she discovered it, spoke out her mind about the matter.

Fanny knew by instinct, long before the first suspicions had fermented her elder sister's thoughts. She detected a sharper, brighter look in Mary's eyes; she calculated a greater distance in Mary's meditative glance.

At first it was as subtle a detection as the record of that weightless rider one straddles on the balance arm. Faintly the scales of her suspecting answered to the application of the signs which she observed. Faintly the weight of a thought was registered upon her consciousness.

If it was not as yet that Mary was in love, at least her mind was centering on that which any moment might turn to burning thoughts.

They occupied the same room together, these two. This had been a habit from childhood. Since the death of Mr. and Mrs. Throgmorton, the accommodation of that house did not necessitate it. But they had grown used to each other's company. They would have missed the sound of each other's voices those moments before the approach of sleep, the exchange of more lucid conversation in the mornings as they dressed.

THE GREEN BOUGH

It was in unaccustomed pauses as she undressed at night that Fanny's mind found the first whispers of her instinct about Mary. It was not that she said to herself — "I used to sit on my bed like that — I used to stare at the wall — I can just remember what I used to think about." Far more it was that, at the sight of Mary doing these things, there came, like an echo into Fanny's pulses, the old emotions through which she had passed when she had been walking round those cliff paths waiting for the destiny that should declare itself for her.

She watched her sister, even more closely than she knew. It was emotional, not conscious observation. Once the matter had fastened itself upon her imagination, the whole spirit of it emotionalized her. She noted all the indications of Mary's condition of mind, without looking for them; almost without knowing she had seen them.

The processes of her thought during that first fortnight when at the last Liddiard was meeting Mary every day, were subtle, subliminal and beyond any conscious intent. Often watching her sister as, regarding herself in the mirror while she did her hair, with those indefinite touches of greater care and more calculating consideration, she found a pain fretting at her heart — a hunger-pain as of one who is ill-nourished, keeping life together but no more.

In this it was as also in the choice of the skirts and blouses Mary wore. It needed no great selection of wardrobe to trace this to its source.

THE GREEN BOUGH

Fanny could never have dreamt of expressing the knowledge that women dress to the dictation of their emotions even if it be something that is never revealed, the color of a ribbon on their undergarments, even the choice of those undergarments themselves. That which touches their skin means insensibly something to them when their emotions are astir. It was not that Fanny had learnt this; she knew it. But it was not that she could speak of her knowledge.

All that happened with Fanny those days was that the observation of these things in Mary emotionalized her. Lying in bed there, watching her sister as she dressed, she found her pulses beating more quickly. She felt a restlessness of body as well as mind. She threw the bedclothes from her and got up, not because she wanted to be dressed herself, but because she could not stay in bed any longer.

And then, when one morning, Mary said —

“I’ve been thinking, Fanny — why shouldn’t I turn that room looking over the garden into a bedroom? We’re awfully cramped here. It’s just like us to go on with the same arrangements, merely because we’re used to them.”

Then Fanny knew, and her knowledge was more of an upheaval in her mind than any thought of this revolution against the placid routine of their existence. So much greater was it that she could not even bestir herself to resentment against Mary for preferring to be alone.

The thought crossed her mind —

THE GREEN BOUGH

"How do I interfere with her? It's awfully selfish of her to want to be alone. It isn't as if we hadn't shared the same room for years."

Such thoughts as these would have been poignant at any other time. Mary was prepared for the assertion of them. But they seemed idle to Fanny then — foolish and utterly devoid of purpose.

She sat on the side of her bed, staring at Mary busily engaged in doing her hair. And she knew so well what the meaning of that centered occupation was. Such a moment she would have chosen herself for an announcement of that nature.

Mary was in love, and with a man who had a wife already. She was surprised in her own soul at the littleness of weight the second half of that realization carried in her thoughts. She did not ask herself what — this being so — Mary was going to do about it. As a problem of impenetrable solution, it meant scarcely anything to her. All that kept repeating itself in her mind was just the knowledge that Mary was in love — Mary was in love.

She felt a sickness in her throat. It was not of fear. It was not exactly of joy. She might have been seized of an ague, for she trembled. The sensation was like waves breaking over her; as though she were in water, fathoms deep, and were struggling to keep her lips above the surface that she might breathe freely. But she could not breathe; only in stolen moments, as if breath were no longer hers to hold.

Mary was in love. She wanted that room by her-

THE GREEN BOUGH

self so that at night she could lie alone with her thoughts and none could touch or spoil them with their presence. She wanted that room alone so that in the morning she could wake with none but her thoughts beside her. She was in love. Suddenly the world to Fanny seemed bitter and black and cold. She was out of it. It had gone by. She was left there on the roadside — trembling.

Love was the magic by which she herself could be revealed to herself when, coming upon this sudden knowledge of Mary, it was that she realized there was no magic in the world for her.

She was alone, unloved, unloving. In that there was merely consciousness, a staring, hungry consciousness of herself. Only in the abandonment of generosity that came with love could she find any meaning in her soul. Only by giving could she gain.

The tragedy of Fanny Throgmorton and the countless women that are like her was that she had none to whom she could give.

All this, without a word in her thoughts that could have given it expression, was what she felt about Mary as she sat on her bedside that morning and watched her sister doing her hair.

VI

JANE made the discovery for herself, but by chance.

One morning when Mary had gone out, indicating the likelihood of her playing a game of golf, Jane put on her oldest hat, took the path through the marshes which avoided the necessity of going through the village where she would be seen and criticized for her clothes, and went alone up onto the cliffs beyond Penlock.

These were rare, but definite, occasions with her. She felt the necessity of them at unexpected intervals as a Catholic, apart from Saints' days and Holy days, feels the necessity of confession and straightway, in the midst of business hours or household duties, seeks out the priest and speaks his mind.

To Jane, those lonely walks with the solemn solitude of those cliffs, were confessional moments when, setting herself at a distance which that wide environment could lend her, she could look on at herself, could calmly inspect and almost dispassionately criticize.

She went without knowledge of her purposes. It was just for a walk, she said, and if questioned why she insisted upon going alone, she would find herself becoming angry at their curiosity.

"Mayn't I sometimes like my own company better

THE GREEN BOUGH

than anybody else's?" she would ask shortly and that was about all she knew definitely of these confessional calls. If she was aware of any mental exercise during those walks, it was in momentary observations of Nature, a lark soaring, a flight of gulls upon the water, the life of that farm in the hollow above Penlock. Of that inquisitorial examination of herself, practically she knew nothing. It took place behind the bolts of doors, all sound of it shut out, barring admittance to her conscious self.

Coming back for the midday meal she would say to Hannah across the table —

"How you can stick in the house all day, one week after another, beats me. It was perfectly lovely this morning up there on the moors. We all make life so automatic here that one might as well put a penny in the slot and have finished with it. It's only a penny-worth we get."

From this they received the impression she had also given to herself, that she had been drinking in the beauties of the countryside. If she had, it was but a sip of wine at the altar where she had been kneeling in inmost meditation.

This morning, feeling the sun too hot for energy, she had found for herself a sheltered bed in the heather where, through a gap in the jungle it became as she lay in the midst of it, she could see the farm in its hollow, the sea of cerulean beyond and, nearer in the foreground, a belt of pine trees standing up amongst their surrounding gorse and bracken.

THE GREEN BOUGH

It was there upon a path leading through the bracken to a gate in one of the farmer's hedges, she caught her first glimpse of Mary and Liddiard. The mere fact of her not being on the golf links as she had said drove the suspicion hot, like a branding iron, on Jane's thoughts.

She watched them pass by below the hill on which she had found her bed and her eyes followed them like a bird's, alert and keen. When they stopped at the gate and Liddiard seated himself on it with his feet resting on the bar beneath while Mary stood below him, Jane made for herself a window in that secreting wall of heather and lay there, watching them, with all her blood fermenting to a biting acid that tasted in her mouth and smarted in her eyes, becoming even, as it were, a self-righteous irritation beneath her skin.

To her it was obvious enough. Their Mary who read so many books, who seemed to care so little what destiny the fateful coach to Bridnorth brought her, was sport of Fate and surely now. Their Mary was in love.

Jane angered at the realization of it to think what a fool her sister was. It would be talked about the whole village over, especially then, during the holidays when the summer visitors were there. One visitor there was in particular who came every year and spent most of her mornings after bathing drying her hair on the beach and talking scandal till hunger and the mid-day meal called her homewards.

What a fool she was! This story of herself and

THE GREEN BOUGH

a married man would linger long whiles in Bridnorth. They had not much to talk of. They preserved their gossipings with assiduous care. Each year it would be whispered about her and men would keep her at a greater distance than ever.

They talked there together for an hour and more. For an hour and more, Jane lay and watched them. What were they talking of? Sometimes by the way he spoke, leaning down and riveting each word upon Mary's attention, it seemed as though their conversation were of the most serious nature.

How could it be serious? What a fool she must be if she thought it was! It was an idle flirtation with him, a married man, alone on his holidays, amusing himself with the most likely girl that offered herself. Yet never with all her astuteness would Jane have considered that Mary was the most likely. Always Mary had seemed, except for her games, insensible to the attractions of men. What had come over her? Fanny was the one whom men with inclination for harmless passing of their time had singled out for semi-serious interchange of ideas. Fanny was romantic. Men liked that when it did not become too serious to interfere with the free pursuit of their enjoyments.

But this, as she watched them there through her curtain of heather, looked more romantic than anything she could ever have imagined about Fanny. Had they been strangers and had she come across them thus she would have felt herself in the presence of something not meant for her to see and, passing them by, she

THE GREEN BOUGH

would have given all impression of looking the other way, however covertly she might have observed.

Yet here it was her own sister and, to herself, calling it her duty, she watched them both with every sense stretched forth to clutch each sign or movement that might give evidence to her impulsive mind how far the thing had gone between them.

She was not long in learning the utmost truth. After a long silence, Liddiard slipped down off the gate and stood in the bracken looking directly into Mary's eyes. Jane felt that look. She held her breath as it pierced into her own eyes. Then, when he laid his hands upon Mary's shoulders and for an instant held her so as he spoke, Jane swallowed in her throat and against the roots of heather felt her heart beating like a trapped bird in her breast.

At that distance, more sure than Mary, she knew what was going to happen. More sure than either of them, she knew. When suddenly, as though some leaping power had swept upon him unexpectedly, he took her in his arms and their heads were one together, linked with his kisses, Jane had known of it more surely than he.

Feeling those kisses on her own lips, on her eyes, her throat, and like hammers beating in her heart, Jane buried her face in the heather but did not know that she moaned with pain.

When she looked up, they had gone.

VII

IF those kisses were hurtful to Jane, they were a sublime realization to Mary. In the rush of them as they pressed against her lips, she felt a consummation of all those forces of life which, with the Bridnorth coach, had so often called to her as it came and passed with its message out of the world.

Rightly or wrongly in the accepted standards of morality, Mary felt such completed justification in those moments as to be sensitive of the surging intentions of life triumphing within her. This, she knew then, was the fullness of meaning in a woman's life. If it were pleasure, it was not the pleasure of sensation; not even the pleasure of the promise of gratification. None of the joys of amorous delay were mingled in those kisses for her.

What she felt in the rushing torrent in her veins was all subsidiary to the overwhelming sense of fulfillment.

He would have lingered there beside that gateway in the bracken, would have dallied with the joy it was to him to feel her whole being in response to his. But Mary had no need of that.

If this was what her mother had meant by concealment of her own sensations, she surely had it then.

THE GREEN BOUGH

This was not an hour of dalliance in her life. It was the deep-sounding prelude to the realization of the very spiritual substance of her being.

At her dictation they left that place in the bracken. In response to her wish they turned from the gateway and sought the beaten path through the heather again. In that moment she wanted no more of his kisses; partly perhaps because in her emotions she could have borne no more; but mostly it was that she wanted space and freedom for her thoughts; to speak them to him if need be, certainly to review them in her mind. It was time she demanded — time to touch the wonder that was coming to her, which, from the power of those kisses, she somehow assumed could not be withheld from her now.

“I could not help that,” he said almost apologetically when she insisted upon their going on. “Somehow or other — I don’t know — honestly, I couldn’t help it, and I suppose I’ve offended you now.”

For one instant she turned her eyes upon him with a searching glance.

“Offended?” she repeated. “Didn’t you realize that I let you kiss me — not once — but —” Suddenly she realized in a swift vision the Mary Throgmorton that was; the Mary Throgmorton of the square, white Georgian house; the sister of Hannah and Jane and Fanny, and she could not say how many times he had kissed her. Her cheeks flamed.

“Don’t talk about offense,” said she almost hotly,

THE GREEN BOUGH

and walked on with him some time in silence, saying no more, leaving him in an amaze of wondering what her thoughts could be and whether that denial of offense was not merely a screen to hide from him the shame she felt at what had happened.

Was she ashamed? It seemed to him then that she was. That probably was the last time he would touch her lips, yet having touched them and felt, not the eagerness as with Fanny, but the sureness of their response, there had been awakened in him the full consciousness of desire to touch them with his lips again.

For now he felt, not master of her, but a servant. At the mere utterance of her command, he must obey. With all his eagerness to stay there longer at that gate there was no power in him of conflict with her wishes when she expressed the desire to go on.

What was it she was thinking as she walked? Did really she hate him for what he had done? The cry her nature had made to him in those moments of the closeness of their bodies had redoubled and redoubled in its intensity. Yet he was less sure of her than he had been before.

He felt like one struggling blindly through the storm of his emotions, answering some call that was not for help but of command. Was that the end of it all? Would he never again hold her in his arms? Tentatively he took her hand which did not resist his holding as they walked.

"My dear," he said — almost below his breath —

THE GREEN BOUGH

"I suppose I've seemed weak — but — I love you. It was not weakness. I can't explain it, but if you knew, really it was strength."

"Please don't say any more — not now," said she and lengthened her stride and threw back her head that all the full sweep of the air might beat upon her face and throat.

It never consciously occurred to her that a woman's throat and the fine column of her neck could express her beauty to a man. Yet as they walked, she knew that his eyes had seen such beauty in hers.

So it was, when Jane looked up again, they had gone. For another half hour and more she sat there in her bed in the heather, trying to appreciate all that it meant. But again and again the sequence of her conventional thoughts was disturbed by the vision of those two as her eyes turned to the gateway in the bracken and she saw them in her mind with lips touching and heads close pressed together in that long embrace.

With that vision all conventionality slipped from her control, even from the very substance of her thoughts. Instinctively she knew she had been witness of something she had neither power nor right to judge when, forcing herself to regard it as all the years of habit and custom would have her do, she shut her eyes to the sight of them in that bracken and called upon her judgment to dispassionate her mind.

That evening she contrived to be alone with Mary

THE GREEN BOUGH

after tea. They walked in the garden, round the paths with their borders of thrift in heavy cushions of growth.

In a tone of casual unconcern, Jane asked her about her game of golf.

Her pause in answering was significant. In full confidence, Jane expected the lie and understood her sister still the less when, having weighed the truth against expediency, she replied —

“We didn't play golf. We went up onto the moors above Penlock.”

It gave Jane the opportunity she sought, but in the frankness of giving confused her. So had her mind forestalled all the progressions of that conversation, that for a moment she was silent.

What sort of woman was this Mary of theirs who seemed to have no guiltiness of conscience, when from childhood she had been trained to listen to the still, small voice? Did she not realize the enormity of what she was doing? Jane's lips set to their thinnest line.

“Do you think it's wise,” she began, and in that tone of voice which, with a sharp edge, cut the plain pattern of her meaning — “Do you think it's wise to go about so much with this man? Even if he weren't married — do you think it's wise?”

The sharp glance which Jane stole at her sister then revealed Mary possessed and unconcerned. So well had she known what Jane was going to say that sur-

THE GREEN BOUGH

prise had no power to disconcert her. But beyond that, there was in some chamber of her mind a certain sureness of herself, a steadying confidence in all she did. This it had also been even in the high torrent of her emotion when she would have no more of his kisses and seemed in that moment to him the substance of unyielding stone his temperature of passion had heated but a moment and no more.

"I think," she replied, after a moment's silence; "I think that this wisdom you talk about — worldly wisdom — is a very over-rated virtue. I think we've lost a lot — all of us — by cultivating it. I find Mr. Liddiard much more interesting than any one or any thing in Bridnorth. Life after all is short enough — dull enough. Why shouldn't I take what interest it offers when I can, while I can? He goes in a few days. What's worldly wisdom to the feeling that your mind is growing instead of stagnating? If you mean you think I ought not to go out with him again, I can't agree with you."

She spoke like a woman addressing a community of women, not as one sister to another. There was a note of detachment in her voice, Jane had never heard before. In all that household, Jane always assumed she had herself the final power of control. She felt it no longer here. So long as Mary was speaking, it appeared to her as though she were one listening to some authority far superior to her own. It was in Mary's voice and yet seemed outside and

THE GREEN BOUGH

beyond her as well. There was power behind it. She could not sense the direction or origin of that power, but it dominated her. She felt small beside it, and feeling small and realizing that it was this Mary, their youngest, who was the voice of it, she grew angry. All control of that situation she had intended to conduct left her. It left her fretting with the sensation of her own impotence.

"You can't agree with me, can't you!" retorted Jane hotly. "You wouldn't agree, I suppose, if I said that, beside being unwise, I thought it beastly and sinful and horrible altogether, to see a girl kissing a married man, kissing him in a beastly way too?"

Never, even from the first moment of her discovery, had she ever meant to say this. This was not Jane's method. What flood of emotion had borne her thus far out of her course? Fully it had been her intention to speak of Mary's friendship with Liddiard as though it were a flippant and a passing thing; to belittle it until, in its littleness, she had shown this foolish sister of hers what folly it was.

How had it happened she had thus exaggerated its importance by the heat of her words? Something had pricked and spurred her. Something had driven her beyond her control. Finding herself opposed by a force so infinitely greater than her own, she had struggled and fought. It had been a moment's hysteria in the sudden consciousness of her impotence. Then what power was it? Not merely Mary herself.

THE GREEN BOUGH

She could not submit her mind to that admission. It was greater than Mary and yet, becoming the voice of it, she felt that this sister of hers was greater than herself.

To Mary, the shock of realization that Jane had seen them that moment in the bracken was not one that seemed to tremble or emotionalize her at all. If she felt any anger at the thought that she had been spied upon — for swiftly recalling the place of that happening, she knew Jane must have been in hiding, — it was an anger that burnt out, like ignited powder, a flash, no more. It left no trace. All her consciousness assembled in her mind to warn her that the meaning of Life which had come in those last two weeks to her was in jeopardy of being made meaningless. It did not frighten her, but set the beating of her heart to a slow and deliberate measure.

Whatever Jane knew and however she intended to use her knowledge, Mary determined to fight for this new-found purpose of her existence. If they were fools, if theirs was the folly of waste, if they let all life go by them to be worldly wise, she could not help or wait for them now.

Something had come with its promise of fulfillment to her, her nature urged her not to ignore. What if he was married? There had been moments in the inception and growth of their relationship when she had thought first of his wife. She thought first of her no longer. She was stealing no intrinsic thing.

THE GREEN BOUGH

In a few days he would go back to his house in Somerset and what he had given her of his mind, as she had seen, had been his to give her; and, if he had kissed her, what had she stolen from his wife in that? He would still kiss his wife. She knew that. As plainly as if they were there before her, she could see their embrace. It meant nothing to her. They would not be the same kisses he had given Mary.

Whatever had been the call of Nature to him in that moment when passion had spoken out of his lips, his eyes, the power she felt in his arms as they crushed her, it had been not through the channel of his body, but his mind.

Insensibly she was learning the multitudinous courses by which Nature came to claim her own. She was stealing nothing from his wife. All that was coming to her was her own and with the sudden realization of Jane's knowledge of what had happened, her first sensation was a warning that her very soul was in jeopardy.

There was nothing to be said then; no defense that she could, or cared to, offer. She knew quite well from those long years of knowledge, how horrible their kisses must have seemed to Jane. Once upon a time, she might have thought them horrible herself. Now, there was nothing to be said that might serve in her defense.

Taking a deep breath, she looked straight in Jane's eyes and stood there, arresting their movement on

THE GREEN BOUGH

the garden path to paint the defiant attitude of her mind.

"Well — if you've seen," said she, "you've seen. There's no more to be said about it. We've all lived together so long, I suppose it's hard for any one of us to realize that our lives are really all separate things. You talk about it as being beastly. I can assure you there was nothing beastly in our minds. However, you must think whatever your mind suggests to you to think, and you must start yourself all the talk about us you say is bound to come when I'm seen about with him, if you feel that way inclined. But I'll tell you just one thing — you can't make me ashamed of myself. I'm twenty-nine."

She turned away, walked with all the firmness of her stride into the house and left Jane, standing there, withered and dry between those borders of spreading thrift and flowers all dropping their seed into the mold that waited for them.

VIII

L IDDIARD was returning to Somerset in three days' time. Before their parting that day above Penlock, he had urged for their next meeting as soon as she was free of household duties the following day.

"Only three more chances," said he, "of being with you, and when I thought most I understood you, understood you so well that my arms seemed the only place in which to hold you, I find I understand you less than ever. You don't ask what it means. You don't say "What are we going to do?" I've told you I love you, but you don't appear to want to know anything about the future. It seems to me that any other girl would be wanting to know what was to become of her. You're so quiet — so silent."

Climbing back down the cliffs, holding on to one of the pine trees in her descent, Mary had turned and smiled at him. It was an inscrutable smile to Liddiard. It was not that he tried to understand it. It was, as it penetrated his mind, that he knew it to be quite impossible of comprehension. More it was as if Nature had smiled upon him, than the mere bright light of the parting of a woman's lips. In its illumination it seemed to reveal to him the vision of him-

THE GREEN BOUGH

self in a strange powerlessness. He felt like some tool of a workman as it lies idle on the bench, waiting the moment for those hands to pick it up and give it purpose. So it appeared to him might a carpenter have smiled with pleasure at the chisel he knew his hands could wield for perfect work. All the more that he had meant to say dried into silence on his lips.

"I don't want to know anything about the future," said Mary as she walked on, "I know you love me and I think I understand what you love and why you love. I know I'm not sophisticated. I've no experience of the world. I don't pretend to understand these things in the light of experience. I haven't got any wisdom about it, but I feel it's not unreal or impossible for you to love me and love your wife as well. I don't feel I want you to say you don't love your wife in order to prove that you love me. I think it would finish everything in my mind if you said you didn't love her. I'm not thinking about the future, because there is no future as you used the word. I don't ask what we're going to do, because I know what we're going to do."

"What are we going to do?" he asked.

"In two days' time," she replied, "you're going home to Somerset and I'm going to stay on here in Bridnorth."

Suddenly she turned again swiftly and barred his passage as he came along down the cliff path behind her.

THE GREEN BOUGH

"Why don't you understand me?" she asked abruptly. "It all seems so plain. Don't you realize how I've been brought up? I know there's a certain sacredness in marriage. I've been trained to regard it as one of the most unbreakable ties in the world. I wouldn't dream of expecting or claiming anything from you, however much you said you loved me. Whatever happened, I shouldn't dream of that. You're half afraid of it. I can see you are. I don't love you any the less because I see it. It seems natural you should be afraid. It seems to me most men would be with most women. But you needn't be."

She had let him be drawn close to her again. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked with all his passion into her eyes.

"That's the first time you've said you loved," he whispered. "Do you know what it sounded like to me?"

She shook her head.

"Like an organ playing in an empty church. My God! You're wonderful."

Then she had let him kiss her again; again, herself, being the one to draw away when emotion rose to stifling in her throat. Again was he obedient to her wishes.

They had arranged to meet the next morning on the cliffs. Liddiard had promised he would bring lunch.

"They'll think we're up at the Golf Club," he had

THE GREEN BOUGH

said, for already in their minds had appeared that urgency for deception which should secure for them the certainty of their meeting.

But the next morning, after her conversation with Jane, Mary dispatched a note to Liddiard at the White Hart Hotel.

He tore it open with fingers that had dread in them.

"Meet me on the beach at 11.30," she had written, "near the bathing tents. Don't bother about lunch."

With a sudden chill it struck him. It was all over. The night had brought her calmer thoughts. Emotion was steadied in her now. She was not going to trust herself alone with him again. It was all finished. On an impulse he took a piece of paper and wrote on it —

"Have been called back to Somerset this morning; so sorry I shall have no opportunity to say good-by."

When he had written, he stared at it, reading it again and again.

Was not this the best? It was too wonderful to be true; too wonderful to last. He knew himself well enough to realize that any prolonged deception with his wife would be impossible. He had the honesty of his emotions; the courage of his thoughts. He could not practice deception with any ease. Wonderful as it was, could any wonder compensate for

THE GREEN BOUGH

the utter wrecking of his home? It was not as though in the wonder that had come to her, she refused to recognize his wife. That was what brought him such amaze of her. Any other woman he would have expected to be jealous, exacting, cruel. She appeared to be none of these.

What, in the name of God, was it she wanted? The sudden wish to understand, the sudden curiosity to find out communicated with the energy in his fingers. He tore up the note he had written and flung the pieces away, sending back the messenger without a reply.

It was playing with life, a sport that in other men earned for them his deepest contempt. It was playing with life, yet the call to it was greater than he could or cared to resist.

At half-past eleven, he went down to the beach where all the inhabitants of Bridnorth sat and whiled away their time till the midday meal, and there he found her, dressed with more care and more effect than she had ever been before. She was lying down under the warm shade of a brilliantly colored parasol and, as he approached her, it seemed to him that there was a deeper beauty in her then than in any other woman in the world.

"Why this?" he said as he sat down. "Here of all places? Do you know very nearly I didn't come?"

"Yes, I was afraid of that," she replied. "Afraid

THE GREEN BOUGH

for a moment. Not really afraid. But I couldn't explain in my note."

"What is it then?"

"We were seen yesterday."

"Who by?"

"My sister — Jane."

"Seen where?"

"By that gate in the bracken."

He screwed up his mouth and bit at a piece of loose skin on his lip.

"What's she going to do?" he asked.

"Nothing. What can she do? No one must know if we meet again — that's all. We must be more careful."

He stared at her in bewildered astonishment.

"I don't understand you," he muttered. "Sometimes you seem like adamant when your voice is softest of all."

She looked at him and with her eyes told him that she loved him and with a little odd twist of her lips, which scarcely she herself knew of, she kissed his lips and at that distance at which he sat from her, he felt the kiss like a leaf falling with a flutter to the ground.

"What do you mean — we must be more careful?" he said thickly. "What do you mean by that? How can we be more careful? Where else could we hope to be more alone than on those cliffs — unless — unless —" His breath clung in his throat. He

THE GREEN BOUGH

swallowed it back and went on in a hoarse voice—

“Unless it were the time we went there.”

“What time?” she asked.

“Night,” said he. “Midnight and all the hours of early morning.”

She lay back on her cushion beneath the warm shadow of her parasol and closed her eyes, saying nothing while he sat staring at the curved line of her throat.

IX

IT was no difficult matter to rise unheard at midnight in her room, unheard to creep quietly downstairs, to open and close the kitchen door into the yard. Having accomplished that, it was but a few steps to the door through the wall into the road.

Now that she slept alone in that room at the back of the house, Mary had no fear of discovery. Nevertheless her heart was beating, an even but heavy throb, nor settling to the normal pulse, even when she found herself out in the lane and turning towards the path across the marshes by the mouth of the River Watchett that leads a solitary way to Penlock Head.

She questioned herself in nothing that she did. Her mind was made. It was no moment for questioning. All questions such as there had been, and doubtless there were many, she had answered. It was no habit of hers to look back over her shoulder. She fixed her destination with firm resolve, and, once the fear of immediate discovery was left behind, she walked with a firm stride. Imagination played no havoc with her nerves. Already her heart was in their meeting place.

A restive heart it was, all bounding at sudden visions, leaping, shying; at moments in riot almost at thought of lying in his arms. Sometimes even there

THE GREEN BOUGH

was fear, a fear, not of the thing she would fly; not a fear that made the heart craven. Rather it was a fear that steeled her courage to face whatever might befall.

Some sense undoubted she had of the mad riot of passion, that it could terrify, that it was frightening like sudden thunder bursting. But just as she would lie still in her bed at home through the fiercest storm, so now she knew, however deep her fear, that she would not complain.

She walked that way through the marshes to their meeting place at the foot of Penlock Hill like one, firm in her step, who went to a glorious death. Death was terrible, but in all the meaning it had, she felt no fear of it.

In such manner as this did Mary Throgmorton go to the confirmation of her faith in Life, and behind her, in the square, white house, she left one to the bitterest of its realizations.

Fanny could not sleep that night. Near midnight, she lit a candle and began to read. But no reading could still the unsettled temper of her mind. Again and again her eyes lifted from the printed page, seeking corners of the room where, in that candlelight, the shadows gathered, harbor for the vague wandering of her thoughts.

Long after midnight, in the communicating silence which falls about a sleeping house, she heard a sound and sat up in bed. Some one had opened and shut the gate into the lane. She got up and went to the

THE GREEN BOUGH

window. If any one passed into the road in front of the house, she must see them. No one came. All was silence again.

Yet something within her insisted upon her conviction that she had not been mistaken. Some one had left the house and, if they had turned the other way, could not possibly have been seen by her.

In that midnight silence, the fantastic shapes the beams of the candle cast, the heavy darkness of the night outside, slight as the incident was, grossly exaggerated it in her mind. She felt she must tell some one. Jane was the person to tell. Jane's fancies were slowly stirred. She might turn it all to ridicule, but if anything were the matter, she would be practical at least.

Slipping her arms into her dressing gown, she went out onto the landing. The door of Jane's room was at the further end. As she passed Mary's door on her way, something came out of the recesses of her mind and took her heart and held it fast.

Mary's door was open. She stood there staring at it while all the pulses in her body accelerated to the stimulus of her imagination.

Always Mary slept with her door closed. It was not to be understood how she had departed from that habit now that she slept alone. Why had she chosen to sleep alone? Was it more definite a reason than Fanny had supposed? What more definite than thoughts of love?

Scarcely aware of the change of her intentions or

THE GREEN BOUGH

that Jane for the instant had dropped completely out of her thoughts, Fanny pushed open the door and softly entered Mary's room.

Just within the threshold, she stopped, half held by darkness and whispered Mary's name.

"Mary — Mary —"

There was no reply. There was no sound of breathing. Never had the whole world seemed so still. She was faintly conscious that her eyes were staring wide in that darkness, staring to find softly what she knew now the dazzling glitter of a light would reveal to her in all its startling truth. All beating of her heart appeared to be arrested as she felt her way across the room to the bedside table where she knew the box of matches lay. Something fluttered in her thin breast, like a thing suspended in mid-air, but it had no relation to the passage of the blood through her veins. It seemed to need purchase, a solid wall against it before it could beat again. Yet no solid wall was there. Flesh and bones in all her substance, Fanny felt as though in those moments her body were a floating thing in an ether of sensation.

She found the matches. With fingers that were damp and cold, she struck one. It flamed up with blinding brightness into her staring eyes. She closed them swiftly and then she looked.

The bed was empty. Their Mary was away.

With trembling fingers, she lit the candle; then gazed down at the crumpled bedclothes, the sheets thrown back, the pillow tossed.

THE GREEN BOUGH

With automatic calculation she leant down and felt the bedclothes with her hand as one feels a thing just dead.

They were warm — still warm. And where now was the body that had warmed them?

With a sudden catch in her throat that was not a sob and had no more moisture of tears in it than a thing parched dry with the sun, she flung herself down on the bed and leant her body against the warm sheets and buried her head in the warm pillow, fighting for her breath like some frightened beast that has been driven to the last of all its hiding places.

X

THEY met in silence on the worn path at the foot of Penlock Hill; two black figures joining in the darkness and, without word of greeting, without question of the way, turning by common consent towards the moors and vanishing into the pine trees.

Never was their silence broken while they climbed the hill. They had breath for that ascent, but no more. Coming to a steep place, he offered his hand to help her and then still held it till they reached the moors.

It was a late rising moon that crept up, shimmering wet with its pale light out of the sea. They stood with the heather about their knees and watched it, hand in hand, still silent; but he felt her trembling and she heard when he swallowed in his throat.

"It had to be a night like this," he said presently when the moon at last rose clear and the light seemed to fall from her in glittering drops that splashed like pieces of silver into the sea. "I know this is the one night of my life," he went on. "I know there'll never be moments like it again as long as I live. Perhaps you don't believe that. You'll think I've said such things before; yet the whole of my existence,

THE GREEN BOUGH

past, present and future, is all crowded into this hour. I know I shall realize it the more fully as I grow older and Time wipes Time away."

She clung to his arm. It was now she was most afraid. The moors were so still about them. Down in its hollow amongst the firs and the misshapen oaks, the farm lay silent and black. No light was there. She thought of them asleep in their beds. So sleeping, she thought of Hannah, Jane, and Fanny. Only they two were awake in all the world it seemed. Only for some vague yet impelling purpose did the world exist at all and alone for them.

She did not feel at his mercy. She was not afraid of him. Indeed she clung to his arm as they stood in the heather, clung to his arm, trembling, appealing as though he alone were left between herself and Fate to soften it; as though to less terrible a note, he could still the sound of voices shouting in her ears.

These were sensations she had no words for.

"You stand there trembling," he said in a whisper. "What are you thinking of, my dear?"

"It's all so quiet," she whispered in reply, and a short laugh with no mirth in it escaped from her throat. "I don't know why I should expect or want it to be anything else."

"And do you want it to be anything else?"

"I suppose I must, or I shouldn't have said that."

"My dear, are you afraid?"

She jerked her head, reluctant to give assent to that.

THE GREEN BOUGH

No wonder, he thought. My God, no wonder women are afraid. If anything should happen, she'll have the brunt of it. Wouldn't I be afraid if I were her?

Such thoughts as these caught him to hesitation a moment stronger than the urging passion in his blood.

Was it fair to her? This girl, who in that stagnating corner of the world knew so little, was it fair? Hadn't he strength to resist it even now; to turn their steps back; to let her go, the great-hearted thing she was, as he had found her? If it might be the one moment in his life to him, would it be the less for letting it pass by? Would realization make it the greater? Might it not make it the less?

A surging desire to be master of himself swept over him. A rushing inclination to protect her from the forces of Nature in himself took louder voice than all his needs. She was too wonderful to spoil with the things that might happen in a sordid world.

For what would they say and think, those sisters of hers, and what sort of hell would life become for her in those narrow streets of little Bridnorth?

It was no good saying things might not happen.

What right had he to subject her to chance? She was too fine, too great of heart for that. With all the generosity of her soul she had placed herself in his hands, it was for him to save her even now, before it was too late. She was afraid. Then if there were a God who gave men strength, he could be strong enough to let her go.

THE GREEN BOUGH

He held her even the tighter with his fingers as in his mind he set her free.

"Mary," he said, "I told you it was strength, not weakness that made me kiss you. I expect you didn't believe that. It was true. And I feel stronger now than then. We're going back again, my dear, now, without waiting, I couldn't stay here longer. We're going back."

"Where?"

She said it in her breath.

"Back to Bridnorth — to our beds. I love you, my dear, that's why we're going back."

She felt a sudden chill and shivered.

"Back?" she whispered. No other word but that could her mind grasp.

As swiftly then the chill blew by. She felt as though she stood in scorching flames, as if the very heather were alight about her. There was pain and it gave her a fierce power she never thought she had possessed. It brought her anger to think she could suffer so much for such return.

Back? They could not go back! Not now! She had been through it all. This that must happen was just a moment. It was nothing to the hours her mind had lived till then.

She took off her hat and flung it down beside her in the heather.

"It's stifling, this heat," she muttered. "Everything seems burning."

He saw her throw down her hat. He heard what

THE GREEN BOUGH

she said. The blood that had been strong like a courageous wine, turned all to water in his veins. He felt his limbs trembling. Something in her was stronger than the greatest purpose he had ever had in his life. It was a purpose he felt might be even stronger than she, yet knew he could not make it so.

It occurred to him, with an ironical laugh in the thought, that she was master of their moments and not he. And yet not she herself. Men were the stronger sex. That was an inherent thought, whatever might be said in abstract argument. Coming to such a moment in life as this, it was the man who must direct. With all the violence of his passions, he could still control.

This, with a loud voice, he told himself in his mind. Yet there was her hat lying in the heather and there in his ears were the sounds of her breathing as she stood beside him. His eyes fell upon her breast that rose and fell as her heart beat beneath it and he knew the current he had breasted with such confidence of power was bearing him back. In all his bodily consciousness then, it was as though his will were failing.

One last effort he made. Stooping, he picked up her hat.

"Shall we go now?" he said.

She swung in an instant's unsteadiness as she stood before him, but made no movement otherwise. One fear had gone in her, thrusting another in its place. Something terrified her now, a fear in her heart that over-rode all bodily fear.

THE GREEN BOUGH

If he should win in purpose now, the world were such an empty mockery of life as she well knew she had no strength to face. Hannah, Jane, Fanny, they might have survived the hollow meaninglessness of it all. They might have taken place in the senseless procession of Time, puppets of women, wasted lives in the thrusting crowd. Never could she fall in with them now.

Yet what was it she was struggling against? Something that had its purpose as well as she? Somehow she sensed it was the laws that men had made for the best of women to live by. He was attempting the best that was in him. But she had no pity for that. If love and contempt, passion and disgust can link in one, they met together in her then.

She never knew she thought all this. It was not in words she thought it. But those laws were wrong — all wrong. Possession was the very texture of them and all through the intricate fabric of life, she knew possession did not count. In instinct, reaching back, beyond the most distant consciousness of mind, she felt there was no possession in the world. No more would she belong to him than he to her. It was he who must give that which she most needed to take. And why had it resolved itself into this struggle, when all she had ever heard or known of men was nothing but the eagerness of passion to express desire?

These were not thoughts. Through all her sub-

THE GREEN BOUGH

stance they swept, a stream of voiceless impulses that had more power than words.

"We're not going now," she said in a strange quietness. "We didn't come here to go back. Not as we came."

Suddenly she put her hands upon his shoulders. He could feel her breath warm and though her voice was so close, it came from far away like the voices of the sirens calling which he knew would always call and which he knew a man must stop his ears and bind his limbs to resist.

"Do you want me to say it?" she whispered. "I'm yours — this moment I'm yours. For God's sake take me now."

It all was darkness then. The moon had no light for them. The very stars were blotted out and far away across the moors, with its insistent note, a night-jar whistled to its mate.

PHASE III

MANY times Fanny tried to speak of that night and of the night that followed before Liddiard went away, but there was a strange serenity in Mary's face in those days which suppressed all Fanny's emotions of sympathy, confidence and vital curiosity.

There were times when she hoped Mary might speak herself, if not of what actually had happened, at least in some measure of Liddiard and herself. Ever since their youth, being much of an age together, sharing the same room, they had had few secrets from each other. If she were to ask no more than Fanny's opinion of Liddiard, it would have afforded loophole for confidence. One discussion would have led to another. If necessary, Fanny would even have revived in her memory all that she had told Mary about her own little tragedy on those cliffs. To have gained that confidence every sense in her needed so much, she would have suffered the cruelest flagellation of memory; the more cruel it was, the more exquisite would have been her pain.

But never had Mary been more aloof. Never had she been more distant and reserved. To Hannah perhaps, if to any, she showed an even closer affection, sometimes helping her with the teaching of her

THE GREEN BOUGH

children and every day spending an hour and even more in their prattling company.

For long walks she went alone. Frequently at night, when she had retired to her room and Fanny on some feminine pretext came to her door, she found it locked.

"What is it?" asked Mary from within.

"Just Fanny."

"What do you want?"

"Oh — nothing! I wondered if you'd finished with that book." Such as this might be her excuse.

"Yes, I have. I left it downstairs in the dining-room."

"Well — good-night, Mary."

"Good-night, Fanny."

No more than this. That locked door seemed symbolical of Mary in those days. So had she barred all entrance to her soul from them and like the Holy of Holies behind the locked gates of the Temple was inapproachable to their unsanctified feet.

And all this seeming was no less than the actual truth. To Mary her body had indeed become the sanctuary, the very chalice of the Host of sacred things. She knew she was going to have a child. Such knowledge was pure folly and had no foundation upon fact. It lay only in her imagination.

Yet lying awake at night and waking early in the mornings with the first light the sun cast into her room, she had sensations, inventions only of the fancy, that were unmistakable to her.

THE GREEN BOUGH

Already she was conscious of the dual life of her being. Such had happened to her as indeed had separated her in difference from them all in that house.

Her thoughts of Liddiard were glowing thoughts. Sometimes as she lay, half sleeping in her bed, she felt him there beside her. But in all her fully conscious moments, she had no need of his return.

Their meetings upon the cliffs those two nights before he had gone from Bridnorth, had left her calm rather than excited. Almost she would have resented his actual presence in her life just then. In the distance which separated them, she felt the warm sense of that part of her being he had become; but his absence was not fretting her with the need of his embraces. No furnace of sexual inclination had there been set alight in her. In this respect he had not differenced her. She was the same Mary Throgmorton of outwardly passionless stone, only the hidden flame he had set light within her was that, unquenchable, which the stress of circumstance in time would burn with such a fervid purpose as none of them could stay.

Behind that locked door of her bedroom the night after his departure, she sat and wrote to him. A short letter it was, free of restraint, as though across some narrow space dividing them, she had just called out of her heart to him and laughed.

"I love you," she wrote. "Don't let it interfere with life. You have given some greater thing than you could ever dream of, and need not think of breaking hearts or

THE GREEN BOUGH

things that do not happen in a healthy world. I am not thinking of the future. For just these few moments, the present is wonderful enough. Just because I belong to you, I sign myself —
YOUR MARY."

Herself, with jealous hands, that morning she posted it and when she came back to the house a letter from him was awaiting her.

Both Jane and Fanny watched her as, with an amazing calmness, she picked it up and put it in her lap.

Both, knowing what they knew, were swift to ask themselves again, was this their Mary who had grown so confident with love.

A smile of expectation twitched about Jane's lips as Hannah, simple as a child, inquired who it was had written.

This would confuse her, Jane thought, and almost with the eagerness of spite, she waited for the flaming cheeks, for all the discomfort of her lip and eye.

Mary looked up quietly from her plate. Almost she felt sorry for them then that they were ignorant of all she knew. What was there to hide in telling them that? She realized Jane knew. She felt her waiting for those signs of the distressing confusion of a guilty heart. She had no guilt in her heart. She was not ashamed. They had no power to shame her.

"It's from Mr. Liddiard," she replied openly.

"Mr. Liddiard!" repeated Hannah. "What's he writing to you about?"

THE GREEN BOUGH .

"I shall know when I read the letter," replied Mary quietly.

"I wonder how you can manage to wait till then," said Jane.

"I don't suppose it's very important," said Hannah, and Jane laughed, but Fanny could bear it no longer. None of them knew what she knew. She left the room.

II

ALONE to her room, Mary brought her letter. That room had become the chapel of her most sacred thoughts. There, in that house, she was alone. There, as though it were the very script of her faith, she brought her letter and, locking the door, took it across to her chair by the window and sat down.

There was something she needed in this message from him. Courage had not failed her. No pricks of conscience fretted her peace of mind. More it was that in the conventional outlook of that house, in the atmosphere indeed of all Bridnorth, she felt set aside. Nor did she fear to be thus separated. Only it was at moments that it was chill. At times she shivered as though the cold edge of a draught through unsuspected chinks had found her out and for the moment set back the temperature of her courage.

Merely momentary were these misgivings. With a shaking of her shoulders, she could dispel them. The touch of his hand across that distance which separated them, the sound of his voice, all to be contained in her letter, these would drive them utterly away.

Alone there in that house, she needed her letter and her fingers were warm and her heart was beating with a quiet assurance as she tore open the envelope.

THE GREEN BOUGH

"Mary—" it began. She liked that. Her heart answered to it. It was not the passionate embrace she sought; rather it was the firm touch of a hand in her own. This simple use of her name fully gave it her.

"Mary—I have been wanting to write to you, my dear, ever since I came home. I even tried in the train coming back when, not only my hand on the paper, but it seemed my mind as well, were so jolted about that I gave it up as a bad job.

"I want you to believe, my dear, that I know my own weakness, but only for your sake do I honestly regret it. For myself, I have no real regrets at all. Knowing you, as I have done, has made a greater fullness in my life. Knowing me, as you have done, can only have brought bitterness and, I am ashamed to think of it, perhaps shame to yours."

Mary laid the letter down in her lap. Fingers of ice were touching on her heart. He thought he had brought her shame. Shame? What shame? If with his wife it were greater fullness to him, what fullness must it not be to her with none other than him beside her? She picked up the letter and the pupils of her eyes as she read on were sharpened to the finest pinpoints.

"I blame myself utterly and I blame myself alone. Life was all new to you. It was not new to me. I should have had the courage of my experience. If my character had been worth anything at all, I ought to have had the will of restraint even to the last. I wonder will you ever forgive me, for believe me, my dear, it is a great wish in

THE GREEN BOUGH

my heart, always to be thought well of by you. I suppose thoughts are prayers and if they are, then you do not know how often I pray that nothing may happen to you. But if my thoughts are not answered and you have to suffer, for my weakness, you may know I will do all I can. None need ever know. With care that could be achieved, but we will not talk of that yet, or will I think of it if I can help it until you let me know for certain. Not once did you mention it, even after the first time we were alone in the wonderful still night on those cliffs. So many another woman would. So many another would have reckoned the cost before she knew the full account. You said nothing. You are wonderful, Mary, and if any woman deserves to escape the consequences of passion, it is you."

Again she laid the letter down. For a while she could read no more. The consequences of passion! Reckoned the cost! The full account! God! Was that the little mind her own had met with?

None need ever know! With care that could be achieved! She started to her feet in sudden impulse of feeling that her body held a hateful thing. Instinctively she turned to the mirror on her dressing table, standing there some moments and looking at her reflection, as though in her face she might find truly whether it were hateful or not.

Seemingly she found her answer, for as she stood there, without the effort of speech or conscious motion of the muscles of her throat, the words came between her lips—"Fear not, Mary—" Scarcely did she know she had said them, yet, nevertheless, they

THE GREEN BOUGH

were the voice of something more deep and less approachable than the mere thoughts of her mind.

It was not hateful. There was all of wonder and something more beautiful about it than she could express.

Had she been told she was to receive such a letter, she would have feared to open it lest it should destroy courage and make hideous the very sight of life. But in trust and confidence having opened it, and in gradual realization having read, its effect upon her had been utterly different from what she might have anticipated.

Such an effect as this upon any other woman it might have had. But this Mary Throgmorton was of imperishable stone, set, not in sheltered places, or protected from the winds of ill-repute, but apart and open for all the storms of heaven to beat upon with failing purpose to destroy.

It may have alienated her that letter. Indeed it cut off and put her consciously alone. She knew in that moment she no longer loved. She knew how in the deepest recesses of her soul there did not live a father to her child. It was hers. It was hers alone. If this was a man, then men were nothing to women. Two nights of burning passion he had been with her and for those moments they had been inseparably one. But now he had gone as though the whole world divided them. The future was hers, not his. With that letter he had cancelled all existence in the meaning of life. There was no meaning in him. A mere

THE GREEN BOUGH

shell of empty substance had fallen from her. To herself she seemed as though she were looking from a great height down which that hollow thing fluttered into the nothingness of space, leaving her in a radiant ether that none could enter or disturb.

Then of a sudden and in all consciousness now, there came with rushing memory into her mind, the thought of that sermon at Christmas time.

"Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favor with God."

She repeated the words aloud; hearing them now as she spoke them in her throat and knowing, with all the fullness of its meaning to her, the realization it gave expression to when she voiced the thought which that day in church had followed it.

"Who was the father of the Son of Man?"

Might there not indeed, as here with her, have been no father at all? The mere servant of Nature, whipped with passion to her purpose, then feared by the laws he and his like had made to construct a world; feared by them, disemboweled by them and by Nature herself driven out and cast aside.

It was not that these ideas had any definite substance of thought in her mind. Those few words she repeated aloud. The rest had merely stirred in her like some nebulous form of life, having neither shape nor power of volition.

She did not know to what plane of thought she had raised herself. She did not appreciate any distinct purpose that it brought. All she knew and in a form

THE GREEN BOUGH

of vision, was that she was alone; that it was not a hateful thing her body held; that she was possessed of something no power but tragic Fate could despoil her of; that it was something over which she had direct power of perfecting in creation; that in the essence of her womanhood, she was greater than he who at the hands of Nature had been driven to her arms and left them, clasping that air which, in her ears, was full of the voices of life, full of the greatest meaning of existence.

III

FOR three days she left this letter unanswered, tempted at moments to misgiving about herself and the future that spread before her, yet always in ultimate confidence, rising above the mood that assailed her.

On the third day, receiving another letter of the same remorseful nature, begging her to write and say she was not in her silence thinking the worst of him, she sent her reply. To the sure dictation of her heart, she wrote —

“I have never thought about forgiveness, not once. I can scarcely believe you wrote these two letters which I have received. Do you remember once we talked about women wasting their lives beneath the burden of prejudice? You were the one man I had ever met, you were the one man, I thought, in all the world, who understood the truth about women. But I suppose there is something in the very nature of men that makes it impossible for them to realize the simple forces that make us what we are. All they see are the thousand conventionalities they have set about us to complicate us. We are not complicated. It is only the laws that make us appear so.

“That first of our two nights on the cliffs, did you find me complicated or difficult of understanding? I showed, as well as gave you myself and this is how you have treated that revelation. I will not let it make me unhappy.

THE GREEN BOUGH

It could so deeply if I allowed it to get the upper hand. If I need anything now, now that I know I am going to have a child—don't be frightened yet, I only feel it in my heart—do you think it is help or advice for concealment? Do you think it is any assistance to me to know that all the world will be ashamed of me, but only you are not?

“Why do you even hint about shame to me? Did you think I shared what you call your weakness? Did you think for those moments that, as you say of yourself, I forgot or lost restraint?

“Never write to me again. Unfortunately for me, it is you most of all who could succeed in making me feel ashamed and I will not be ashamed. What lies before me is not to be endured but to be made wonderful. Will shame help me to do that?

“Perhaps you think I am an extraordinary woman. You say to yourself, ‘Well, if that's her nature, it can't be helped, we've got to go through with it.’ You would not believe me if I told you that all women in their essence are the same. It is only with so many that the prize of self-advancement, the hollow dignity of social position, the chimera—I don't know if I've spelt it right—of good repute, all of which you offer them if they obey the laws you have made to protect your property, are more attractive and alluring than the pain and discomfort and difficulty of bringing children into a competitive world. But you call this the line of least resistance.

“Because you find the majority of women so ready to be slaves to your laws do you imagine that they are not in essence the same as me? But starve one of those women as I and my sisters have been starved by circumstance, deny to her the first function which justifies her existence by the side of men with their work, as thousands and thousands are denied, taking in the end any husband who

THE GREEN BOUGH

will fulfill their needs of life, and you will find her behave as I behaved.

"I have to thank you for one thing. Since I met you, my mind has opened out and in a lot of things, such as these which I am writing, I can think in words what a lot of women only feel but cannot express. I have to thank you too, that for those moments I loved. So many women don't even do that, not as they understand love.

"All that time together, playing golf, walking and talking on the cliffs, I felt our minds were at one. That with a woman is the beginning of love. All unities follow inevitably after that. It is not so with men. Your letters prove it to me. Perhaps this is why the formality of marriage is so necessary to make a screen for shame. I wonder if you realize in how many married women it is a screen and no more. I know now that to my own mother it was no more than that.

"I had no shame then. I loved. Loving no longer, I still now have no shame because, and believe me it is not in anger, we have no cause to meet again. I know I am going to have a child. I know he is going to be wonderful if I can make him so. I shall get my love from him as he grows in years and I am sure there is only one love. Passion is only an expression of it. My life will be fuller than yours with all the possessions you have. Bringing him up into the world will absorb the whole heart of me.

"Oh, my dear — I feel a great moment of pain to think what we have lost and truly I do not forget my gratitude for what I have gained. Never worry yourself in your thoughts by what you imagine I shall have to face. I know what my sisters will say, but what they will say will be no expression of the envy they will feel. I am quite human enough to find much courage in that.

"When it comes, I expect I shall leave Bridnorth. I confess I am not a Bombastes. I shall hide my shoes in my cupboard, but none shall step into them, nevertheless.

THE GREEN BOUGH

"I hate to say this and do not say it in any backbiting spirit. I know you will think you have to support me. You have not. Fortunately my share of what we girls have is enough to support me and enable me to bring him up as I mean him to be brought up. So please send me nothing. It would hurt me to hurt you by returning it.

"I do not think I can say any more. I count them up — six sheets of paper. Yet I believe you will read them all.

"Good-by."

IV

IN the appointed time, Mary knew that the reality of her life had come to her. At the first opportunity after the sureness of her knowledge, she attended Holy Communion in Bridnorth church.

It was not so much to pray she went, as to wait in that silence which falls, even upon the unimaginative mind, during the elevation of the host and all the accompanying ceremony of the rubric.

She asked no favor of her God. She waited. She said no prayers. She listened. It was a spiritual communion, beyond the need of symbols, above the necessity of words. Psychology has no function to describe it. It was her first absolute submission of both mind and body to the mystery of life. Here consciously, she felt she could do nothing. Here, as it might be, was the instant of conception. Whatever it was, whether it were God or Nature, this was the moment in which she held herself in suspension, feeling she had no conscious part to play.

When she rose from her knees, it was with an inner and hidden knowledge of satisfaction that she had passed successfully through some ordeal of her soul; that whatever it was within her, it had not failed in the supreme test of her being; that, in a word, she

THE GREEN BOUGH

was a woman at last and that life had justified itself in her.

If such a moment there be as this instant of conception; if in her soul where no words conceal and no thoughts have substance, a woman can spiritually be aware of it, such an instant this was in the life of Mary Throgmorton.

From this moment onward, she set her mind upon definite things. In two months' time she had planned everything that she was to do.

Passing once through Warwickshire lanes one summer when she had been staying with friends in Henley-in-Arden, a storm of rain had driven them for shelter. They had come to the towpath of the canal near by where it flows into the lock at Lonesome Ford when the clouds that had been threatening all day heaped up to thunder and broke above them with a sudden deluge of rain.

Sharply from the towpath where they walked, the ground rose in high banks of apple orchard, through the trees of which, on the top of the hill, could just be seen the half-timbered gables of an old farmhouse.

Taking a gap in the hedge and climbing the orchard hill, they had hastened there for shelter. It was close upon tea-time. The farmer's wife had let them in.

She was a sour-visaged woman, slow and sparing of speech, yet in the silent, considerate way she gave them welcome and tended to their wants, there had

THE GREEN BOUGH

been something intangible yet inviting that attracted Mary to her.

With an expression upon her long, thin and deeply lined face that suggested resentment to them all, she showed them into the best parlor, the room that had its black horsehaired sofa, its antimacassars on all the chairs, its glass cases containing, one a stuffed white owl, the other a stuffed jay; the room where the family Bible lay on a home-worked mat reposing on a small round table; the room that had nothing to do with their lives, but was an outward symbol of them as God-fearing and cleanly people.

In time Mary came to learn that with those who work upon the land, there are no spare moments; that the duties and demands of the earth know no Sabbath day of rest. That afternoon, she pictured them on Sundays in that room, with hands folded in their laps, reading perhaps with quaint intonations and inflections from the massive volume on its crocheted mat. It was never as thus she saw them.

As they went by, catching a glimpse of the parlor kitchen with its heavy beams of oak in the ceiling, she had wished they might have had their tea there. But the old lady was too unapproachable for her to ask such a favor then. In the best parlor they sat, eating the bread and butter and homemade bullace jam which she had brought them, commenting upon the enlarged photographs in their gilt frames on the walls.

One picture there was of a young girl, a very early

THE GREEN BOUGH

photograph which had suffered sadly from unskillful process of enlargement. Yet unskillful though it had been, the photograph had not been able to destroy its certain beauty. Mary had called her friends' attention to it, but it seemed they could not detect the beauty that she saw.

"I don't think a long face like that is beautiful in a woman," one of them had said.

"I didn't mean the features," replied Mary. "She looks —"

She stopped, words came in no measure with her thoughts in those days. But when the farmer's wife had returned later to inquire if they wanted any more bread and butter cut, she questioned her with an interest none could have resented as to who the girl might be.

"Is she a daughter of yours?" asked Mary.

"Darter?" She shook her head and where another woman might have smiled at the compliment of Mary's interest, she merely turned her eyes upon the portrait as though she looked across the years at some one who had gone away. "That was me," said she. "It was took of me three days afore I was married. My old man had it out a few years ago and got it made big like that. Waste of money I told him."

And with that, having learnt their needs, she went out of the room.

It was later, when they had finished tea, and the sun was striking through the lace curtains into that room, almost obliterating its artificialities, when indeed they

THE GREEN BOUGH

knew the storm was over, they left the parlor and finding the farmer with his wife in the kitchen, came there asking what they must pay.

"We beant settin' out to provide teas," she replied with no gratuity of manner in her voice.

"I guess you didn't come lookin' for tea," said the farmer, who had evidently talked it over with her and decided what they should do and say — "The storm drove 'ee."

While her friends stood arguing upon the issue, Mary had looked about her, observing the warm color of the brick-paved floor, the homely sense of confidence in the open chimney with its seats at either side, the jar of wild flowers, all mingled, that stood upon the window sill, the farmer's gun on its rest over the mantel-shelf; then the farmer and his wife themselves.

Once having seen that enlarged portrait, she knew well what it was that attracted her to the sour visage, the uninviting expression and the attenuated features of the farmer's wife. The girl she had been, the wistful creature she had set out for company with through life, somewhere, lurking, was in company with her still. She needed the finding, that was all.

"Waste of money," she had told him. There lay much behind that accusation; much that Mary if she had had time would have liked to find out.

The farmer himself, at first glance, would have taken the heart of any one. He smiled at them as he spoke with an ingenuous twinkle of good humor in

THE GREEN BOUGH

his eyes. A mere child he was; a child of the land. Such wisdom as he had, of the land it was. The world had nothing of it. His thoughts, his emotions, they were in the soil itself. Adam he was, turned out of his garden, scarce conscious of the flaming sword that had driven him from the fruitful places, but seeking the first implement his hands could find to toil with and bring the earth to good account.

Unable to persuade these two that they should give any return for the meal they had had, they expressed their gratitude as best they could and went away. It was not until they had come back through the sloping orchard and were again upon the towing path of the canal, that Mary thought of the possibility of returning there at some other time.

The simplicity of the life of those two, the sense she had had of that nearness to the earth they lived on had touched her imagination deeper than she knew.

"Just wait for me a moment," said she. "I must go back —" when, before they could ask her reason, she had left them and was running back through the orchard.

The door which led into the parlor kitchen was opened to her knocking by the farmer's wife. Face to face with her purpose, she stammered in confusion as she spoke.

"I know you don't think of supplying teas or anything like that," she said awkwardly — "but I do so like your — your farm, your house here, that I wondered if there'd ever be any chance of coming back

THE GREEN BOUGH

again for a little while; staying here I mean. I wondered if you would let me a room and — if there'd be any trouble about providing me with meals, then let me get them for myself. I should like to come here so much that I had to come back, just to ask."

With no change of expression, no sign of pleasure at Mary's appreciation of their home, the farmer's wife looked round at her husband still seated at his tea and said,

"Well — what do 'ee think, Mr. Peverell?"

His mouth was full. He passed the back of his hand across it in the effort of swallowing to make way for words and then, as best he could, he mumbled,

"'Tis for you to say, Missis. 'Twon't stop me milking cows or cuttin' barley."

She turned to Mary.

"'Ee'd have a mighty lot to do for 'eeself," she had said — "If 'ee come, 'twould be no grand lodging. 'Ee'd be one of us."

What better, she had thought. To be one of them, was to be one with everything about them, the fruit trees in the orchards, the dead leaves and the new. Even then, although she never knew it clearly, the fruitful scents of the earth had entered and for long were to linger in her nostrils.

It was not that she had any knowledge of the soil, or could have explained to herself how one crop should follow another. She knew nothing of the laws a farmer lives by, the servant of Nature that he is, or

THE GREEN BOUGH

the very earth he grows to be a part of and learns to finger as it were the very ingredient of his being.

She had not been trained to reason. All that she felt of the attraction of that place did not suggest itself in the direct progression of purposes to her mind. There were the odors of life in the air. She took them in through her senses alone. Through her senses alone she knew their fecundity. That fruitfulness it was which filtered like drops of some magic elixir into her blood.

It had been two years since she went that day to Yarningdale Farm, yet the odors still lingered, calling some sense and purpose in her soul which, until the sermon at that Christmas-time and following her meeting with Liddiard, had been all vague, illusive and intangible.

Now, with more assurance, she knew. In that old farmhouse, if they would have her, she was going to bring her child into the world. There, in what seemed not the long but the speedy months to her, she was going to breathe in the scents of the earth, absorbing the clean purposes of life as they are set forth in the tilling of the soil, the sowing of the seed, the reaping of the harvest.

It was to be close to the very earth itself she needed. There is no clear line of argument to trace in a woman's mind. Her marriage bed had been the heathered moors. The scent of the earth had been all about her as she lay in Liddiard's arms. No soft or spotless pillows had there been for her head to

THE GREEN BOUGH

rest on. In no garments had she decked herself for his embrace. No ceremony had there been, no formalities observed. There was nothing that had happened to associate it in her mind with the conventional wedding night, blessed by the church, approved of by all.

If blessing there had been, and truly she felt there had, then the stars had blessed them, the soft wind from off the sea across the heather roots had touched her with its fingers; the dark night with all its silence had been full approval in her heart.

And he who was to come out of such a union as that, what else could he be but a wild, uncultivated thing? A seed falling from the tree, not sowed by the hand of man in exotic places; a young shoot finding its soil in the rotting fibers of earth that only Nature had prepared; a green bough that Nature only in her wildest could train, fighting its way upwards through the forest shades to the clear brilliance of the eternal light.

Such she felt he was. As such she meant him to be. There was no science in her purpose, no clear argument of thought. No reason other than this first impression she had had can be traced to justify the determination to which she came.

To Mrs. Peverell she wrote asking if they could let her have their little room beneath the eaves of the thatch when, hearing it was vacant, she replied that she would come down for a day or two and see them first.

THE GREEN BOUGH

But before she went, one thing had she set herself to perform. Now her sisters must know. Her mind was prepared. It was Hannah she determined to tell.

V

IT was a morning in the middle of the week, after the children's lessons were over. With eyes that recorded intangible impressions to her mind, Mary watched her eldest sister kissing each one as they went. With each one, it was not merely a disposal, but a parting; not a formality but an act, an act that had its meaning, however far removed it might have been from Hannah's appreciation of it.

"What do you feel about those children?" she asked her, suddenly and unexpectedly when the last one had gone and the door had closed.

"Feel about them?"

Hannah looked up in surprised bewilderment.

"I've never thought what I felt," she added. "They're darlings — is that what you mean?"

"No — that's not quite what I mean. Of course they're darlings. Do you ever think what you feel, Hannah?"

"No."

"Never think in words — all higgledy-piggledy and upside-down, of course — but words that explain to you, even if they couldn't explain to anybody else?"

"No."

"I don't believe any of us have ever done that,"

THE GREEN BOUGH

Mary continued —“ unless perhaps Jane. She thinks in words sometimes, I believe, but I'm sure they hurt her when she does, so she probably does it as little as possible. Just to say they're darlings doesn't convey what you feel. You don't know what you do really feel — do you?”

“ No — I suppose I don't.”

“ I expect that's why, when you have to deal with real things where words only can explain, they come like claps of thunder and are all frightening. I've got something to tell you that will frighten you, Hannah. But it wouldn't have frightened you so much if you'd ever thought about those children in words. I don't believe it would frighten Jane. It would only make her angry.”

“ What is it?” asked Hannah. She was not frightened as yet. Mary's voice was so quiet, her manner so undisturbed and assured, that as yet no faint suspicion of what she was to hear was troubling her mind.

“ Let's come out into the garden,” said Mary.

Even there, with that issue, she felt she wanted the light of open air, the growing things about her, the environment her whole body now was tuned to. That room was confined, and suffocating to her. There were the two portraits on the wall, who never, with all their love, would be able to understand what she had to tell. There were the echoes of countless family prayers that had had no meaning. There was all the atmosphere of conventional formality in which

THE GREEN BOUGH

she felt neither she nor her child had any place. It was of him she was going to tell. She could not tell it there.

"Come out into the garden," she repeated and herself led the way, when there being something to hear which already Mary had wrapped in this mystery of introduction, Hannah could do no less than follow with obedience.

It was between those borders, now massed white with double pinks, softening the air with the scent of them as they breathed it in, that they walked, just as Jane and she had done before.

"Do you ever wish you'd had a child, Hannah?" Mary asked presently, and Hannah replied —

"I don't think I've ever really wanted to be married."

So much was it an answer that would have satisfied her once, that Mary smiled to think how different she had become. Not for one moment had it been her meaning that Hannah should see that smile. Not for one moment would she have understood it. Yet she saw. The sudden seizing of her fingers on Mary's arm almost frightened.

"You smiled," she whispered — "Why did you smile?"

The honest simplicity of her brought Mary to a sudden confusion. She could not answer. Seeing that smile, Hannah had caught her unawares in her thoughts. She knew then she was going to hurt this gentle creature with her simple view of life and her

THE GREEN BOUGH

infinite forbearance of the world's treatment of her.

Here was the first moment when truly she felt afraid. Here was the first time she realized that pain is the inevitable accompaniment of life. She tried to begin what she had to say, but fear dried up the words. She moistened her lips, but could not speak.

"Tell me why you smiled," repeated Hannah importunately. "What is it you've got to say?"

Mary had thought it would be easy. So proud, so sure she was, that abruptness had seemed as though it must serve her mood. She tried to be abrupt, but failed.

"Oh, Hannah, I've got such a lot to say," she began, and with an impulse took her sister's arm and of a sudden felt this gentle, gray-haired woman might be as a mother to her when all the world, as now she was realizing with her first confession of it, would be turned against her. "I don't know how to begin. I know you must understand, and I think I want you to understand, more than anybody else. No one else will. Of course I can be sure of that."

She had succeeded, as well she knew she would, in frightening Hannah now. She was trembling. Leaning on her arm, Mary could feel those vibrations of fear. So unused to all but the even flow of life, and finding herself thus suddenly in a morass of apprehension, the poor creature's mind was floundering helplessly. One step of speculation after another only left her the more deeply embedded in her fears.

THE GREEN BOUGH

"Tell me what it is," she whispered — "Tell me quickly. Was it that Mr. Liddiard?"

How surely she had sensed the one thing terrible in her life a woman can have to tell. Never having known the first thrilling thoughts of love, her mind had reached at once to this. Countless little incidents during the time that Liddiard was in Bridnorth, incidents that had attracted her notice but which she had never observed, had come now swiftly together as the filings of iron are drawn to a magnet's point. The times they were together, the letters she had received, sometimes a look in Jane's face when she spoke of him, sometimes a look in Fanny's when she was silent. One by one but with terrible acceleration, they heaped up in her mind to the pinnacle of vague but certain conclusion.

"Was it that Mr. Liddiard?" she repeated.

"Yes."

"I felt it was. I felt it was. Don't say you're in love with him — a married man — Oh, Mary, that would be terrible."

"I'm not in love," said Mary.

The deep sigh that drew through Hannah's lips made her afraid the more. How could she tell her? Every moment it was becoming harder. Every moment the pride she felt was not so much leaving her as being crowded into the back of her mind by these conventional instincts, the habit of affection for her family, the certain knowledge of their shame, the disproportionate value of their thoughts of her.

THE GREEN BOUGH

A few hours before she had asked herself what mattered it if they thought the very worst, if they had no sympathy, if with their contempt of her they turned her from the house. In any case she was going. Never could she stay there. Never could this child of hers breathe first the stifling air that she had breathed so long.

Yet now when her moment of confession was upon her, pride seemed a little thing to help her through. The piteous fear in Hannah weakened it to water in her blood. She felt sorry for her sister who had done nothing to deserve the shame she was sure to feel. Conscious of that sorrow, she almost was ashamed of herself. Nothing was there as yet to whip her pride to life again. With mighty efforts of thought, she tried to revive it, but it lay still in her heart. This fear of Hannah's, her deep relief when the worst she could think of proved untrue, kept it low. With all the strength she had, Mary could not resuscitate her pride.

"What is it then?" Hannah continued less tremulously — "What is it if you're not in love? Was he a brute? Did he make love to you?"

With all the knowledge she had gained, Mary now found herself amazed at this simplicity of mind which once quite well she knew had been her own. For an instant it gave her courage. For an instant it set up this new antagonism she had found against the laws that kept her sex in the bondage of servitude to the needs of man. So in that instant and with that

THE GREEN BOUGH

courage, she spoke it out, abruptly, sharply as she had known she must. The swift, the sudden blow, it made the cleanest wound.

"I'm going to have a child, Hannah," she said, and in a moment that garden seemed full of a surging joy to her that now they knew; and in a moment that garden seemed to Hannah a place all horrible with evil growing things that twined about her heart and brought their heavy, nauseating perfume, pungent and overbearing to her nostrils.

She dropped Mary's arm that held her own. With lips already trembling to the inevitable tears, she stood still on the path between those rows of double pinks, now bearing up an evil, heavy scent to her, as she stared before her.

It could not be true! How could it be true? She fought with that, the refusal to believe its truth.

"He was only here a fortnight," she muttered oddly. "You didn't know him. You'd never met him before. You only played golf with him, or you walked on the cliffs. You didn't know him. How can you expect me to believe it happened — in a fortnight? Mother was engaged to father for two years. I — I wasn't born till fourteen months after they'd been married!"

She laughed — a thin crackle of laughter.

"You're a fool, Mary. You don't know what you're talking about. He was only here a fortnight."

"It's quite true, Hannah," said Mary quietly. "I'm going to have a child."

THE GREEN BOUGH

Her heart was beating evenly now. They knew. Pride was returning with warming blood through her veins. Less and less she felt the chill of fear.

Swiftly Hannah turned upon her.

"But you said you weren't in love!" she exclaimed.

How quickly she was learning! Already love might have explained, excused, extenuated.

"I'm not in love," said Mary—"I know now I'm not in love. I was at the time. At least I know what love is. The thing you love doesn't destroy love when it goes. Once you love, you can't stop loving. The object may alter. Your love doesn't. If there's no object then your love just goes on eating your heart away. But it's there."

"Oh, my God!" cried Hannah—"Where did you learn all this—you! Mary! The youngest of all of us! Whom do you love then if you don't love him? Oh, it's horrible! Is your heart eating itself away?"

"No."

"Then what? What is it? I don't understand! How could I understand? I am an old woman now. Somehow you seem to make me know I'm an old woman. What is it? What do you love?"

"I told you I'm going to have a child," whispered Mary—"Isn't that something to love? It's here with us as I'm talking now. There are three of us, Hannah, not two. Isn't that something to love?"

For a long moment, Hannah gazed at her, then, suddenly clasping her hands about her face she turned

THE GREEN BOUGH

and with swift steps ran, almost, down the path and disappeared into the house. It was as she watched her going, that Mary had a flash of knowledge how deep the wound had gone.

VI

NOW this much was accomplished in the schedule of her mind. They would all know. She left it to Hannah to tell them. The next day after this confession to her sister, she went to Yarningdale Farm, having made all arrangements to stay there two or three days and complete her plans for the future.

It had been a difficult moment to tell Hannah. She had not quite realized beforehand how difficult it would be. Pride she had calculated would have helped her from the first; pride of the very purposes of life that had passed her sisters by. But pride had not been so ready to her thoughts when the actual moment of contact had come. The habitual instincts of convention had intervened. Pride, when it had come to her aid, had not been pride of herself. It was proud she was of her sex when in the abruptness of that instant she had flung her confession before Hannah.

There would be no question of pride; no support could it give her when she came to tell Mrs. Peverell. To that simple farmer's wife it could only seem that here was one, pursued by the error of her ways, seeking sanctuary and hiding her shame in the remotest corner she could find.

THE GREEN BOUGH

Giving no reason to Jane or Fanny, but only to Hannah for her sudden departure, she went the next day into Warwickshire.

"You can tell them when I'm away," she said to Hannah. "It's no good thinking you needn't tell them. Hiding it won't conceal. They must know."

With an impulsive gesture she laid her hands on Hannah's shoulders and looked into those eyes that indeed, as she had said, even in those few short hours of knowledge, had grown conscious that she was old.

"I don't know how much you hate me for bringing all this trouble on you. It shan't be much trouble, I promise you. No one need know why I've gone away. But I sort of feel sure of this, Hannah, you don't hate me for the thing itself — not so much as you might have thought you would have done."

Hannah tried to meet the gaze of Mary's eyes. Her own held fast a moment, then faltered and fell. Something in Mary's glance seemed to have tracked down something in her. The one with her child had glimpsed into the heart of her who had none. It had been like a shaft of light, slanting into a cellar, some chamber underground that for long had been locked, the bolts on whose door were rusty and past all use, the floor of which was no longer paved for feet to walk upon.

For so many years untenanted had that underground chamber been that, as has been said, Hannah had forgotten its existence. Content had come to her with the house of life she lived in and now by the

THE GREEN BOUGH

illumination of this ray of light, shooting through cellar windows, lighting up the very foundations of the structure of her being, she had been made aware, when it was all too late, of the solid and real substance upon which Nature had built the wasted thing she had become.

"Don't!" she muttered. "Don't — don't!" and almost in shame it might have been she hung her head as though it were Mary who might accuse, as though Mary it were who rose in judgment above her then.

.

Mr. Peverell in a spring cart from the nearest station brought Mary to Yarningdale Farm. She had no need to touch Henley-in-Arden. There was no likelihood that whilst there she would ever come across her friends. They had walked many miles that day. It was the highest improbability they would ever walk that way again; and certainly not to visit the farm.

"It happen be a quiet day," he said as he gathered up the reins, "or I couldn't have come for 'ee with the spring cart. No — I couldn't have come for 'ee with the spring cart if it didn't happen to be a quiet day. I got the machine ready last night and we be cuttin' hay to-morrow."

Cutting hay!

"May I help?" she asked with an impulsive eagerness. He looked down at her on the lower seat beside him and his eyes were twinkling with a kindly amusement.

THE GREEN BOUGH

"'Ee can help," said he, "but hay-makin' ain't helpin'—it's work. When they cut the grass over at Stapeley—Lord Orford's place there over—there's some of the ladies puts on them dimity-like sunbonnets and come and help. But then you see there's plenty to do the work." His eyes twinkled again. "We've only got hundred and thirteen acres and there's me and the carter and a boy. My missis comes out. So does the carter's wife. But 'tain't helpin'. 'Tis work. We can't 'ford amusements like helpin' each other. We have to work—if you understand what I mean."

"But I mean that too," she said quickly. "I meant to work. Of course I don't know anything about it; but couldn't I really do something?"

"We'll be beginning half-past five to-morrow mornin'," he said and she felt he was chuckling in his heart. She felt that all who did not know the land as he knew it were mere children to him.

"Can't I get up at half-past five?" she asked.

"Can 'ee?"

"Of course I can. I want to work. Do you know that's one of the things I want to come here for. When I come and stay—that's what I've come to arrange with Mrs. Peverell—when I come and stay, I want to work. I can do what I'm told."

"There's few as can," said he. "Them things we're told to do, get mighty slow in doin'. Could 'ee drive a horse rake?"

"I can drive a horse."

THE GREEN BOUGH

He whipped up the old mare and said no more until she asked him why they had not cut the grass that day. It was so fine, she said, and fine weather she thought was what they wanted first of all.

"There be plenty of fine days when the grass is green," said he. "'Twill be fine now a few days, time we'd be gettin' it in. We'd a shower yesterday — a nice drop of rain it was. Sun to-day and they trefolium'll have their seed just right and nigh to droppin'. 'Ee want the seed ripe in the stack. 'Tain't no good leavin' it in the bottom of the wagon."

She let him talk on. She did not know what trefolium was. He needed a listener, no more. Questions would not have pleased his ear. All the way back he talked about the land and as to one who understood every word he said. There was his heart and there he spoke it as a lover might who needed no more than a listener to hear the charms of his mistress. The mere sound of his voice, the ring it had of vital energy, these were enough to make that talking a thrilling song to her. It echoed to something in her. She did not know what it was. Scarce a word of it did she understand; yet not a word of it would she have lost.

This something that there was in him, was something also in her. Indistinctly she knew it was that which she must feed and stimulate to make her child. As little would he have understood that as she had comprehension of his talk of crops and soil. Their language might not be the same, but the same urging

THE GREEN BOUGH

force was there to give them speech and thought. Just as he spoke of the land though never of himself or his part with it, so she thought of her child, a thing that needed soil to grow in. No haphazard chance of circumstance did she feel it to be. Tilling must she do and cleansing of the earth, before her harvest could be reaped. Her night would come, that night before, that night when all was ready, that night after rain and sun when the seed was ripe and must be gathered in the stack and none be wasted on the wagon floor.

"'Ee understand what I'm sayin'," she suddenly heard him interpose between the level of her thoughts.

"Yes, yes — I understand," said she. "And you don't know how interesting it is."

He turned the mare into the farm gate and tossed the reins on to her back.

"She's a knowsome girl," he said that night as he lay beside his wife. "She's a knowsome girl. 'Twon't rain to-morrow. There was no rain in they clouds."

VII

THE next evening it was, after the first day in the hayfield and while Mr. Peverell in the big barn was sharpening the knives of the mowing machine, that Mary set herself to the task of telling his wife why she wanted to come to the farm.

Hard as she knew it would be, so much the harder it became when alone she found herself watching that sallow face with its sunken and lusterless eyes, the thin, unforgiving line of lip, the chin set square, obediently to turn the other cheek to the smiting hand of Fate.

Mrs. Peverell was knitting.

"A woolly vest," said she — "for the old man, come next winter. Time they leaves be off the apple trees, the wind ain't long afindin' we'd be here top of the hill."

For a while Mary sat in silence counting her stitches — two purl, two plain, two purl, two plain. The needles clicked. The knotted knuckles turned and twisted, catching the light with rhythmic precision. And all the time she kept saying to herself — "Soon he'll come back from the barn and I shan't have said it. Soon he'll come back."

"Did you make all your children's things for

THE GREEN BOUGH

them?" she asked with sudden inspiration, striking the note to key her thoughts when she could speak them.

The needles clicked on. The knotted knuckles twisted and turned as though she had never heard. The head was bent, the eyes fastened upon her stitches.

Thinking she had not heard, Mary was about to repeat her question when suddenly she looked. Stone her eyes were, even and gray. Through years, each one of which was notched upon her memory, she looked at Mary across the dim light of their parlor kitchen.

"I had no children," she said hardily; "all the stitches I've ever gathered was for my man."

Her gaze upon Mary continued for a long silence then, as though her needles had called them, her eyes withdrew to her knitting. Saying no more, she continued her occupation.

To Mary could she have said less? There was the gap filled in between that winsome creature whose portrait hung upon the wall in the other room and this woman, sour of countenance, whose blood had turned to vinegar in her heart.

Many another woman would have been still more afraid, possessed of such knowledge as that. With a heart that swelled in her to pity, Mary found her fear had gone.

Somewhere in that forbidding exterior, she knew she could find the response of heart she needed. Even Nature, with her cruelest whip, could not drive out the deeper kindness of the soul. It was only the body she could dry up and wither, with the persisting fer-

THE GREEN BOUGH

ment of discontent; only the external woman she could embitter with her disregard.

For here was one whom circumstance had offered and Nature had flung aside. Great as the tragedy of her sisters' lives might be, Mary knew how much greater a tragedy was this. Here there was no remedy, no fear of convention to make excuse, no want of courage to justify. Like a leper she was outcast amongst women. The knowledge of it was all in her face. And such tragedy as this, though it might wither the body and turn sour the heart, could only make the soul great that suffered it.

Mary's fear was gone. At sight of the unforgiving line of lip and square set chin to meet adversity, she knew a great soul was hidden behind that sallow mask.

The long silence that had followed Mrs. Peverell's admission added a fullness of meaning to Mary's words.

"It'd sound foolish and empty if I said I was sorry," she said quietly, "but I know what you must feel."

The lusterless eyes shot up quickly from their hollows. Almost a light was kindling in them now.

"'Ee bain't a married girl," she said, "Miss Throgmorton or what 'ee call it, that's how I wrote my letter to 'ee."

"Yes."

"How could 'ee know things I'd feel?"

"I do."

"How old are 'ee?"

THE GREEN BOUGH

"Thirty next September."

"Why haven't 'ee married?"

"I haven't been asked. Look at me."

"I am."

"But look at me well."

Mrs. Peverell stared into her eyes.

"I have three sisters older than me," Mary went on.

"Four girls — four women. We're none of us married. None of us was ever as pretty or sweet as you were when that photograph was taken of you in the other room."

The silence that fell between them then as Mrs. Peverell gazed at her was more significant than words. For all they said, once understanding, they did not need words. Indications of speech sufficed.

"Did any of 'ee want to be married?" asked the farmer's wife. "Did you?"

"Did you?" replied Mary.

"I wanted a good man," said she, "and I got him."

"Yes, but looking back on it now — all these years — back to that photograph in there, was that what you wanted?"

All this time Mrs. Peverell had been holding her needles as though at any moment the conversation might command her full attention no longer and she would return to her knitting. Definitely, at last she laid it in her lap and, leaning forward, she set her eyes, now lit indeed, upon Mary's face before her.

"'Ee know so much," said she slowly. "How did 'ee learn? What is it 'ee have to tell me?"

THE GREEN BOUGH

Without fear, Mary met her gaze. Long it was and keen but she met it full, nor turned, nor dropped her eyes. Brimmed and overflowing that silence was as they sat there. Words would have been empty sounds had they been spoken. Then, but not until it had expressed all their thoughts, Mrs. Peverell's lips parted.

"It's sin," she said.

"Is it?" replied Mary, and, so still her voice was that it made no vibrations to disturb the deeper meaning she implied. In their following silence, that deeper meaning filtered slowly but inevitably through the strata of Mrs. Peverell's mind, till drop by drop it fell into the core of her being. In the far hidden soul of her, she knew it was no sin. She knew moreover that Mary had full realization of her knowledge. Too far the silence had gone for her to deny it now. Whatever were the years between them, in those moments they were just women between whom no screen was set to hide their shame. They had no shame. All that they thought and had no words for was pure as the clearest water in the deepest well.

It was at this moment as they sat there, still, without speech, that the door opened and Mr. Peverell entered. Swiftly his wife turned.

"'Ee'll not be wanted here awhile," she said sharply. "Go and sit in the parlor, or back to the barn, or get to bed maybe. The hay'll make without talking."

Obediently, like a child, he went out at once and closed the door. It was not things they talked of that he might not hear. Not even was it things they talked

VIII

THE moment Mary entered the square, white house on her return to Bridnorth, she was aware that both Jane and Fanny knew. The coach had set her down outside the Royal George, but no faces had been at the windows as she went by. No servant had been sent up the road to carry back her bag. Outwardly she smiled. Her disgrace had begun.

This was the end of Bridnorth life for her. Here was to begin a new phase wherein she had none but herself to lean upon; wherein the whole world was against her and in that substance of stone already hardening in her spirit, she must stand alone.

The whole house seemed empty as she came in. She went to her room without meeting any one. They could not long have finished tea. She looked into the drawing-room as she went by. No tea had been left out for her.

Her bed was prepared to sleep in. There were clean towels and a clean mat on the dressing table; but the sign by which they always welcomed each other's return after absence was missing. There were no flowers in the room. The garden was full-yielding. Flowers in profusion were withering in the beds. There was no bowl of them in her room.

THE GREEN BOUGH

It was here, indeed it was everywhere, she felt the presence of Jane. It was not Hannah, now that she had time to think it out, it was not Fanny, but Jane she had come back to meet. Jane with the unyielding spirit of those laws Mary had found consciousness of, against which she set herself in no less unyielding antagonism.

It was bitterness, as it is with so many, that had ranged Jane in battle against her sex. She made no allowances. Almost with a fierce joy, she kept to the very letter of the law. Hers was the justice of revenge and there are no circumstances can mitigate one woman in another's eyes when she transgresses as Mary had done.

In her room she waited, unpacking her things, then sitting and looking out into the garden until the bell rang for their evening meal. With sensations divided between a high temper of courage and a feeling of being outcast in that house she had known so long as home, she went down to the dining-room.

They were already seated. Jane was carving the joint. She did not look up. Fanny raised her eyes in silence. The wish to give her welcome was overawed by wonder of curiosity. It was Hannah who said —

“ You told us in your letter you were coming back by this afternoon's coach, but we weren't quite sure.”

Caught in an instant's impulse, with an effort Mary controlled herself from saying —

“ Didn't you do what Jane told you to do?”

THE GREEN BOUGH

She held her tongue and sat down.

It was a strange and oppressive silence that fell upon them during that meal. Oppressive it was, but electrical as well. Vivid, vital forces were at work in all their minds. Storms were gathering they all knew must burst at last. Something there was that had power to gather those forces to their utmost before they broke and were dispersed in speech.

There they were, four unmarried women, seated about that table with the two portraits looking down upon them in their silence. So they had occupied their allotted positions year by year — year by year. Often there had been quarrelings between them. Often they had not been on speaking terms. Winds of disagreement had fretted the peaceful surface of that house again and again.

But this which was upon them now was unlike any silence that had fallen upon them before. Then they had kept silent because they would. It was now they kept silent because they must. The pervading presence of something about them was tying their tongues from speech. Without the courage to tell themselves what it was, they knew.

There was another in their midst. Those four women, they were not alone. It was not as it had been for so many years. They knew it could never be so again. Something had happened to one of them that set her apart. Each in the variety of her imagination was picturing what that something was. Hannah it frightened. Jane it enraged. Fanny it stirred so

THE GREEN BOUGH

deeply that many times through the terribleness of that meal, she thought she must faint.

One and all they might have spoken, had it been no more than this. But that presence in the midst of them kept their tongues to stillness. Life was springing up, where for so long there had been all the silence of a barren field. They could hear it in their hearts. Almost it was a thunder rolling that awed and overwhelmed.

The sound of their knives and forks, even the swallowing of their food hammered across that distant thunder to their conscious ears. Each one knew it was becoming more and more unendurable. Each one knew the moment must come when she could bear it no longer. It was Mary who reached that moment first.

Laying down her knife and fork and pushing away her plate unfinished, she flung back her head with eyes that gathered their eyes to hers.

"Why don't you speak?" she cried to them. "Why can't you say what you're all wanting to say — what's got to be said sooner or later? I know you know — all of you. Hannah's told you. And you've thought it all out, as much as it can be thought out. I don't want any favors from you. This has been my home. I'm quite ready for it to be my home no longer. In any case I'm going away. There's no question, if you're afraid of that, of my appealing to you for pity or generosity. It's only a question of the spirit in which I go and the spirit of what I leave be-

THE GREEN BOUGH

hind. That's all. And why can't you say it? Why can't you tell me what it is? You, Jane! Why don't you speak? You're the one who has anything to say. You told them not to meet the coach. You told them not to put any flowers in my room. If it's something really to fight about, let's fight now. I'm not going to fight again. I'm going away where my child will be born with all the best that I can give it, but I'll hear what you've got to say now, only for God's sake say it!"

IX

NONE of them knew their Mary like this. Until that moment scarcely in such fashion had she known herself. New instincts had risen in her blood. Already the creative force was striking a dominant note in her voice, setting to fire a light in her eyes.

They felt that evening she had gained power that would never be theirs. Hannah fell obedient to it as one who humbles herself before mighty things; Fanny fell to fear, awed by this note of battle that rang like a challenge in her voice.

Jane alone it was who stood out away from them and, from amidst the ranks of that army of women who acknowledge the oath of convention, offering both heart and blood in its service, accepted the call to combat.

"You talk," she said, with her voice rising swiftly to the pitch of conflict; "you talk as though there were two ways of looking at what you've done. You talk as though there were something fine and splendid in it, but were not quite sure whether we were fine or splendid enough to see it. I never heard anything so arrogant in all my life. You seem to think it's a concession on your part to say you're going away. Of course

THE GREEN BOUGH

you're going away. We've lived decently and cleanly in this place all these years. They've had no reason to be ashamed of us," her eyes flashed to the portraits and back to Mary, "not till now. Do you think we're going to flaunt our shame in their faces!"

Catching a look of pain in Hannah's eyes, as though that last blow had been too searching and too keen, she struck it home again.

"It is shame!" she said. "I'm not so different from all of you. I feel ashamed and so do they. What else can we possibly feel — a married man — a man you don't even love. It's filthy! And if you want to find another word for it than that, it's because you've even come to be ashamed of the truth. There's something in decency; there's something in modesty and cleanliness. They taught us it. The whole of their lives they taught us that. They brought us up to be proud of the class we belong to, not to behave like servant girls snatching kisses that don't belong to us with any man who comes along and likes to make a fool of us."

Fanny, who up to that moment had been gazing at her sister, caught in a wonder at this flow of speech, now of a sudden dropped her eyes, twining and untwining the fingers in her lap. How could Mary answer that? Cruel as it was, it had the sting of truth. She dared not look at her and could only wait in trembling for her reply.

She might have gained courage had she looked. Those blows had not beaten Mary to her knees. With

THE GREEN BOUGH

her head thrown back, she waited for the last word, as though, now they had come to it, there were rules to be observed and pride in her own strength put aside all need to ignore them.

"Have you anything more to say?" she asked with a clear voice.

"Do you want any more than that?" retorted Jane.

"I don't mind how much more there is," replied Mary quietly, "we're saying all we feel. We aren't mincing things. I'm going to say what I feel. I'm going to hit and hurt as hard as you, so go on if you want to. This isn't a squabble. I don't want to bicker or cavil or interrupt. We're not just cats fighting now, we're women and we'll try and talk fair. Say anything more you've got to say."

"Well, if that's not enough for you," continued Jane, "if it is not enough to allude to what I saw with my own eyes, or to tell you there are servant girls who could behave better than that, then I'll talk of what, thank God, I didn't see and I'll tell you it's worse than shame what you have done and not even the excuse of being betrayed by love that you have to offer for it. I'll say it, Mary, and I don't care now because you've asked for it. You must be a bad woman in your heart, there must be something vile about you that makes you not fit to touch us or be in the same house with us. You've asked for that and you've got it. You've wanted every word there is to say. I should have left that unspoken if you hadn't asked for it. But that's what I feel. If you were a woman off the

THE GREEN BOUGH

streets in London and sitting there at our table, I couldn't feel more sick or ashamed at the sight of you."

"Jane!" cried Hannah. "Oh, don't say anything so horrible or terrible as that!"

"What's terrible about it? What's horrible about it?" asked Mary. "It isn't true. Jane knows it isn't true. When a woman's fighting for the conventions Jane's fighting for, she doesn't use the truth — she's incapable of using it."

"What is the truth then?" exclaimed Jane. "If you've satisfied yourself you know, if you've invented anything truer than what I've said to make an excuse for yourself, let's hear what it is."

"Yes, you shall hear it," said Mary, and a deep breath she drew to steady the torrent of words that was surging in her mind. "First of all it's not true that I didn't love. I did. She's perverted the truth there. I did love. I'm not going to tear my heart open and show you how much. I don't love any longer. That's what Jane has made use of — the best she could. But what I feel now has nothing to do with it. What I feel now is the result of circumstances it won't help any way to explain. What happened that makes the vile-ness she talks about, happened when I was in love, as deeply in love as any woman can be, and as I never expect to be again. But it's not because of love that I'm going to defend myself. It's not because of love that I show this arrogance, as you call it. That's not the truth I've found or invented for myself. Love's only half the truth when you come to value and add up

THE GREEN BOUGH

the things that count in a woman's life. Of all the married people we know, how many women who have found completion and justification for their existence really love their husbands? Love! Oh, I don't know! Love's an ecstasy that gives you a divine impetus towards the great purposes of life. I don't want to talk as though I'd been reading things out of a book. That almost sounds like it. But you can't imagine I haven't been thinking. These two months, these last six months, ever since something that happened last Christmas time, I have. And thinking's like reading, I suppose. It's reading your own thoughts."

A smile of security twitched at Jane's lips.

"Well, is this the wonderful truth?" she asked. "Are we to sit and listen to you, the youngest of us, telling us that love's an ecstasy? Because if you're going to give us a lecture about love, perhaps you'd like a glass of water beside you."

"No, that's not the wonderful truth," she replied quietly. She felt Jane could not sting her to anger and somehow she smiled. "The truth is this, which they up there had never learnt and no one seems to know. Life's not for wasting, but what have been our lives here, we four girls—girls! Women now! What has it been? Waste—waste—nothing but waste. Why has Hannah's hair gone gray? Why are you, Jane, bitter and sour and dry in your heart? Why's Fanny drawn and tired and thin and spare? Why do I look older than I am? Because we're waste—because Life's discarded us and thrown us on one side,

THE GREEN BOUGH

because for a long time now there's been nothing in the world for us to do but sit in this room with those portraits looking down on our heads and just wait till we filter out like streams that have no flood of purpose to carry them to the sea. Our lives have only been a ditch, for water to stagnate in. We find nothing. We can't even find ourselves. Fanny there, grows thinner every year. And who's to blame for it?"

Her eyes shot up to the portraits on the wall and half furtively all their eyes followed hers.

"They're to blame, but not first of all they aren't. What makes it possible that Jane can speak as she does, talking about what has happened to me as the vilest of all vile things? Men have made it possible, because men have needed children for one reason and one reason only. Possession, inheritance and all the traditions of family and estate. These are the things men have wanted children for and so they made the social laws to meet their needs. But there are more things in the world to inherit than a pile of bricks and a handful of acres. Do you think I want my child to have no more inheritance than that? I tell you almost I'm glad he has no father! I'm glad he won't possess. There are things more wonderful than bricks and acres that are going to be his if I have the power to show them to him. There are things in the world more wonderful than those which you can just call your own. And it's those laws of possession and inheritance we have to thank for the idleness our lives have been set in. Jane thinks herself a true woman just because she's clung to mod-

THE GREEN BOUGH

esty and chastity and a fierce reserve, but those things are of true value only when they're needed, and what man has needed them of us? Who cares at all whether we've been chaste and pure? None but ourselves! And what's made us care but these false values that make Jane's shame of me?"

With flashing eyes she turned to Jane.

"You've asked for the truth," she cried now. "Well, you shall have it as you thought you gave it to me. You're not really ashamed of me. You're envious, jealous, and you're stung with spite. Calling me a servant girl or a woman of the streets only feeds your spite, it doesn't satisfy your heart. You'd give all you know to have what I have, but having allowed yourself to be a slave to the law all you have left is to take a pride in your slavery and deck it out with the pale flowers of modesty and self-respect."

She stood up suddenly from her chair and walked to the door. An instant there, she turned.

"As soon as I can get my things together," she said, "I'm going to a place in Warwickshire. If Hannah wants to know my plans afterwards I'll write and tell her. Don't think I'm not quite aware of being turned out. That's quite as it ought to be from Jane's point of view. You'd dismiss a servant at once. But don't think you've made me ashamed. I only want you to remember I went as proud, prouder than you stayed."

This was the real moment of Mary Throgmorton's departure from the square, white house in Bridnorth. When a few days later she left in the old coach that

THE GREEN BOUGH

wound its way over the crest of the hill on which so often she had watched it, it was the mere anticlimax of her going and to all who saw that departure must have seemed but a simple happening in her life.

PHASE IV

I

THE hay was made and stacked when Mary returned to Yarningdale Farm. They were thatching the day she arrived, wherefore there was none to meet her. The old fly with its faded green and musty cushions brought her over from the station. Those were long moments for contemplation as they trundled down the country roads and turned into the lanes that led ultimately to the farm.

The train had been too swift for arrested concentration of thought. In the train she had not been alone. Here, as the iron-rimmed wheels rumbled beneath her, crunching the grit upon the road with their unvarying monotonous note, she felt at last she had come into her haven and could turn without distraction into the thoughts of her being.

Had ever that old vehicle carried such burden before? With the things Jane had said still beating up and down in the cage of memory, she pictured some weeping servant girl dismissed her place, carrying her burden away with her in shame and fearfulness to find a hiding place in a staring, watchful world.

Looking out upon the fields as they passed, knowing them as property, to whoever they might belong, again she felt how the right of possession amongst men it

THE GREEN BOUGH

was that had made shame of the right of creation amongst women.

"Trespassers will be prosecuted," she read on a passing board that stood out conspicuously in the hedge as they rolled by.

There it was! That was the law! Trespassers upon the rights of man! The law would descend with all its force upon their heads. But had they not trespassed upon the rights of women? Which was the greater? To inherit and possess? To conceive and create? Did not the world reach the utmost marches of its limitations in that grasping passion to possess? Was that not the root of the evil of war, the ugliness of crime, the stagnation of ideals? To possess and to increase his possessions, to number Israel and to keep all he had got, were not these the very letters of the law that held the world in slavery; were not these the chains in which, like bondwomen, she and her sisters had walked wearily through the years of their life?

The last lane they passed along led through a heavily timbered wood before they reached the farm. Some children there were gathering fagots into their aprons. She leant out of the window to watch them, her mind set free for that moment of the encompassing sense of possession.

That was the spirit that should rule the world. She knew how hopeless it was to think that it could be so. It was the spur of possession that urged men to competition. The whip of competition in turn it was that drove out idleness from the hearts of men. And yet,

THE GREEN BOUGH

if women had the forming of ideals in the children that were theirs, might they not conceive some higher and more altruistic plane than this? Giving, not keeping, might not this be the deep source of a new civilization other than that which drove the whole world with the stinging lash of distrust?

She was going to bring a child into the world that would have nothing it could call its own, not even a name. The fagots of life it must gather. The berries on the hedgerows which belong to all would be its food. So she would train its heart to wish for only those things that belonged to all. Never should it know the fretting passion of possession. Work was man's justification, not ownership, and a workman he should be; one who gave with the sweat of his brow and who, by the heart to give which she would stir in him, would covet of none the things they called their own.

In this spirit — and little more it was in a grasping world than an ecstasy of thought — Mary Throgmorton came to Yarningdale Farm.

She knew it was a dream she had had; a dream induced in her by the heat of the day, the monotonous vibrations of that old vehicle she had ridden in, the still quiet of the countryside through which she had passed. Yet, nevertheless, for all its ecstasy, for all the dream it might be, such a dream it was as any woman must surely have, so circumstanced as she; so driven to rely upon what she alone could give her child for walking staff to serve him on his journey.

Knowing it was a dream, it seemed no less real to

THE GREEN BOUGH

her. Lying that night on the hard-mattressed bed, in her little room beneath the eaves of the thatch, she took the dream in purpose into her very soul. Give she must, and all she had, and what else had she to give but this? For that moment and for all the months to follow it could be given in the utmost fullness of her mind. Was it not now and most of all when he was closer to her being than ever it should so chance again, that she could give out of her heart the spirit that should go to make him strong to face the world that lay before him?

Dreams they might be, but such thoughts would she hold with all the tenacity of her mind until, through external means alone, she was compelled to feed him. For all those seven months to come, she herself would work — work in the fields as he must work. The sweat should be on her brow as it should be on his. Her limbs should ache as one day his in happy fatigue of labor should ache as well.

It was thus she would make him while yet the time of creation was all her own and then, when out of her breast he was to take his feed of life, there would be ways by which she alone could train him to his purpose.

So still she lay, thinking it all out with thoughts that knew no words to hamper them, that when at last she fell asleep, it was as one passing through the hanging of a curtain that just fell into its concealing folds behind her as she went.

II

“**I**’VE told the old man,” Mrs. Peverell informed Mary the next morning. “Not all of it, I haven’t. Men don’t understand what beant just so. He can’t abide what’s dropped in the farm-yard comin’ up. ‘’Tis wheat,’ I tell ‘en. ‘’Tain’t crops,’ says he. ‘’Twill make a bag of seed,’ I says. ‘The ground weren’t prepared for it,’ says he. That’s men. Mebbe they’re right. ‘Nature may have her plan,’ I tell ‘en, ‘but God have his accidents.’ ‘I can’t grow nawthing by accident,’ says he. ‘You can’t,’ says I, ‘but afore you came, that’s the very way they did grow and I guess there’s as much rule about accidents as there is of following peas with wheat.’ He looks at me then and he says no more, which is good as sayin’—‘You women be daft things,’ for he picks up his hat and goes out and the understandin’ doant come back into his eyes afore he feels the tilled earth under his feet.”

So Mr. Peverell knew that in certain time Mary was going to have a baby. He looked at her shyly when next they met. It was in the orchard sloping down the hill that drops to the towpath of the canal. He was calculating the yield of apples, just showing their green and red, and she had come to tell him that the midday meal was ready.

THE GREEN BOUGH

"Thank you, ma'am," said he, when he had always called her "Miss" before. This was the hedge, the boundary of that tilled and cultivated field his mind had placed her in. Beyond that limit, as Mrs. Peverell had said, he would not understand. With a childish simplicity he had accepted all that his wife had told him. She had appeased his need for understanding. Perfectly satisfied, he asked for no more.

"Are you going to give me work to do?" she asked as they walked back together to the house. "Real work, I mean. I can work and I'm so interested."

"Work won't be easy for the likes of you," said he.

"No, but there are things I could do. Things that aren't quite so laborious as others. I could milk the cows, couldn't I? If once I got the trick of it, it would be easy enough, wouldn't it?"

"Women beant bad milkers," he agreed with encouragement. "There's no harm in 'ee tryin'."

"When could I begin?"

"'Ee could try a hand this evenin' when our lad brings the cows in. They be fair easy — them's we've got now. Easy quarters they all of them have and they stand quiet enough wi' a bit of coixin'. I dessay 'ee could coax 'em well enough. 'Ee've a softy voice to listen to when 'ee's wantin' a thing and means to get it."

She laughed.

"I didn't know I had," she said.

"No? Women doant know nawthin', seems to me. 'Mazin' 'tis to me how well they manages along."

THE GREEN BOUGH

She went into the cow sheds that evening and had her first lesson. It was tiring and trying and unsuccessful and her back ached. But in the last few minutes, just when she was giving up all hope of ever being able to do it and the strain of trying had relaxed in her fingers, a stream of milk shot forth from the quarter she held in response to the simplest pressure of her hand.

"That's it! That's it!" exclaimed the boy. "Doant 'ee get into the way of strippin' 'em with 'ee's fingers, not till they've got to be stripped and 'twon't come t'other way."

She rose the next morning early when through her window she heard the cows coming into the yard and slipping on her clothes without thought of how she looked, she went down to the shed and tried again.

In three days' time she had mastered it and gave an exhibition of her skill to Mr. Peverell who stood by with smiles suffusing his face.

"That'll do," said he. "The lad couldn't do no better'n that."

"Well, can't I look after the cows altogether?" she begged. "Drive them in and out and feed and milk them? Then you can have the boy for other work."

"It's a samesome job," he warned her. "There's clockwork inside them cows' udders and 'tain't always convenient to a lady like yourself to go by it."

"Can't you believe me," she exclaimed, "when I tell you I don't consider myself a lady, any more than Mrs. Peverell wastes her time in doing? I'm just a woman like she is and I want to work, not spasmodi-

THE GREEN BOUGH

cally, not just here and there, but all the time. Do you remember what you said about helping?"

"I've no recollection," he replied.

"Well, you said it wasn't help was wanted in a hay-field, 'twas work. I want to make something of myself while I'm here. I don't just want to think I'm making something. Can't you trust me to do it?"

Mr. Peverell looked with a smile at his wife who had come out to witness the exhibition.

"What do you think, mother?" said he.

"I think women knows a lot more'n what you understand, Mr. Peverell. You can understand all what you can handle and if you could handle her mind, you'd know well enough she could do it."

"So be," said he obediently and he turned to the boy. "You can take cartin' that grass out 'long them hedges this afternoon," he said. "There woant be no cows for 'ee to spend 'ee time milkin'. We've got a milkmaid come to Yarningdale. They'll think I be doin' mighty well with my crops come I tell 'em next market I've got a milkmaid well as a boy."

III

THE life of Mary Throgmorton during those months while she worked at Yarningdale Farm was a succession of days so full of peace, so instinct with the real beauties which enter the blood, suffuse the heart, and beat through all the veins, that her soul, as she had meant it should be, was attuned by them to minister to its purpose.

At six every morning she descended from her little room beneath the thatched eaves. At that hour the air was still. The chill of the dew that had fallen was yet in it. The grass as she walked through the meadows was always wet underfoot. Mist of heat on the fine days was lingering over the fields. Out of it the cows lifted their heads in a welcome following their curiosity as she came to drive them back into the farm.

When once they had come to know her voice, when once they had come to recognize that straight figure in the cotton frocks she wore, no further need there was for her but to reach the gate and open it, calling a name she knew one by. They ceased their grazing at once and turned towards her. One by one they trooped through into the lane that led to the farm. One after another, she had a name to murmur as they went by.

No moment in all that labor there was but had its

THE GREEN BOUGH

freedom for contemplation. As she walked through the meadows to gather them; as she followed them down the lanes; as against the flanks of them she leant her cheek, cool with that morning air, stealing their warmth, there ever was opportunity for her thoughts.

It soon became automatic that process of milking. Only at the last moment when the hot stream of milk began to be flagging in its flow, did she have to detach her thoughts from the purpose that governed her, and concentrate her mind upon the necessary measure of stripping them to the last drop.

But for these moments, her thoughts were never absent from that sacred freight she carried to its journey's end. The very occupation she had chosen all contributed to such meditation as her mind had need of. The milk she wet her fingers with as she settled down upon the stool before each patient beast, hot with the temperature of its blood, was stream of the very fountain of life her thoughts were built on. The rhythmic, sibilant note as it hissed into the pail between her knees, became motif for the melody of her contemplation.

She whispered to them sometimes as she milked. Whisperings they were that defy the capture of expression. No words could voice them as she voiced them with the murmur on her lips. Sometimes it was she whispered to the quiet beast against whose velvet flank her cheek was warming. Sometimes she whispered to her child as though his cheek were there fast pressed against her and his lips were drawing the stream of life out of her breast.

THE GREEN BOUGH

It cannot be wondered that she thought often of these things while she was milkmaid at Yarningdale Farm. In any environment the mind of a woman at such a time must seek them out, stealing pictures of the future to feed her imagination upon. But there, in those surroundings, Mary Throgmorton was close upon her very purpose as the days turned from morn to evening and the weeks slipped by towards the hour for which she waited.

But deeper than all such thoughts as these, there had entered her soul the wider and fuller conceptions of life. Subconsciously she realized the cycle it was, the endless revolving of the circle of design that had no beginning and no end but was forever emerging from and entering into itself in its eternal revolutions, always creating some surplus of the divine essence of energy, always discharging it in thought, in word and deed; flung from it, as drops of water are flung from the speed of the mill wheel while it turns to the ceaseless flowing of the stream.

What else could she see with a heart for seeing, what else, so close to Nature as she was, could she see but this? Every day, every night, the cattle ate their fill of the grass that had grown in their pastures. Every morning, every evening, they gave their yield of all they had consumed. It was no definite and conscious observation that brought to her eyes those vivid and luxuriant patches of green in the fields where the cows had manured the grass; it was no determined deduction that conveyed to her the realization how a field

THE GREEN BOUGH

must be grazed, must be eaten away and consumed to increase it in the virtue of its bearing. It was no mechanical process of mind which led her to the understanding of how when the field was cut for hay and stacked within the yard to feed the cattle through the winter months, still it returned in its inevitable cycle to the fields to feed the flow of life.

Through the winter months the cows were stalled and kept in their pound. In that pound they trod to manure the straw the fields had grown and back again it would come in the early spring to lie once more upon the fields that had given it; so ever and ever in its ceaseless procession, some surplus of the energy that was created would be set free. A calf would go out of the farm and be sold at the nearest market. For three days its mother would cry through the fields, hurt with her loss, grudging her milk, but in the end Nature would assert itself. She would be caught back into the impetus of the everlasting cycle of progression, fulfilling the purpose of life, contributing to the creation of that energy which was to find its expression in the sons of men.

All this without knowing it she learnt in the fields and under the thatch of Yarningdale Farm. All this, as she had meant to do, she assimilated into her being to feed that which she herself, in her own purpose, was creating.

So her son should live, if it were a boy she bore. So she planned for him a life that had none of the limitations of possession, but must give back again

THE GREEN BOUGH

all that it took with interest compounded of noblest purpose. This alone should be his inheritance, this generosity of heart and soul and being that knew no other impulse than to give the whole and more than it had received.

Not one of these impressions came with set outline of idea to the mind of Mary Throgmorton. In the evenings as she sat in the kitchen parlor, sewing the tiny garments she would need and listening to Mr. Peverell talking as he always did about the land, it was thus she absorbed them. Drawn in with her breath they were, as though the mere act of breathing assimilated them rather than a precise effort of receptivity.

The same it was in the fields where she walked, in the stalls where she milked her cows. Each breath she took was deep. It was as if the scent of those stalls, the air about the meadows, the lights of morning and evening all taught her that which she wished to learn.

Her mind was relaxed and just floating upon life those days. It is not to be understood where she learnt that this must be so. It is not to be conceived how, with her utter inexperience, she knew that no determined effort to create her child could serve the purpose that she had. In through the pores of her being, as it became the very air her lungs inhaled, she took the sensations which day by day were borne upon her.

There were times when, after the first physical consciousness of her condition, she forgot she was going to bear a child. There were times when the knowledge

THE GREEN BOUGH

of it seemed so distant, that it was as though she walked and lived in a dream, a sensuous dream, where there was no pain, no suffering of mind, but things were and were not, just as they happened like clouds to pass before her vision.

There were times when she knew so well all that there lay before her. Then pain seemed almost welcome to her mind. Then she would promise herself with a fierce joy she would not submit to any of the subterfuges of skill to ease her of it.

"I'll know he's being born," she would say aloud. "I'll know every moment to keep for memory. Why should I hide away from life, or lose an instant because it comes with pain?"

So Mary Throgmorton traversed the months that brought her to fulfillment; so time slipped by with its clear mornings and the dropping lights of evening till winter came and still, with the nearing approach of her hour, she continued milking the cows for Mr. Peverell. Not all the persuasion they offered could make her cease from her duties.

"I'm milkmaid here," she said. "Any farm girl would keep on to the last. There'll be some days yet for my hands to lie in my lap. Let them touch something till then."

They let her have her way. Only the carter and the boy were there about the place to see her. She had no sense of shyness with them. Every now and again some cow was taken to a farm near by to profit. It was common talk, unhampered by any reticence, to com-

THE GREEN BOUGH

ment upon the condition of each beast as she neared her calving time. The functions and operations of Nature were part of the vast plan of that ever-revolving cycle to them. They knew no coarseness in their attitude of mind; they knew no preciousness of modesty.

Before she had been at Yarningdale for long, Mary realized with the greater fullness of perception how vast a degree of false modesty there was in the world as people congregated in the cities and with brick walls and plaster shut themselves out from the sight of Nature.

It had all been false, that modesty which their mother had taught them. Love, pleasure and passion, if these were the fruits of the soul man had won for himself, what shame could there be in permitting them their just expression? Love was uplifting and in the ecstasy it brought were not the drops flung farther, higher from the wheel in the acceleration of its revolutions? Was not the stream in flood, those moments when love came in its torrent to the heart of a man? Once for a moment she had loved and knew now that ecstasy could never come to her again.

Pleasure, it was true, she had never known, but the deep passion of motherhood none could rob her of. All those days and weeks and months were hours of passionate joy to her. Never was she idle. Never was her passion still.

That moment, one night it was with the moonlight falling on her bed, when first she felt the movement of

THE GREEN BOUGH

her child within her, was so passionate a joy of physical realization that she sat up in her bed and, with the pale light on her face, the tears swelled to overflowing in her eyes.

"What should I have done, what should I have been," she whispered to herself, "if this had never happened to me?"

Occasionally during those seven months there were letters reaching her from Bridnorth. Fanny wrote and Hannah wrote. Never was there a letter from Jane. At first they asked if they might come and see her, but when she replied she was happier alone, that seeing her as she was, they might the less be able to understand her happiness, they asked no more.

In further letters they wrote giving her Bridnorth news, the people who had come down that summer, the comments that were made upon her absence and later, when the actual truth leaked out.

"People have been very kind on the whole," wrote Hannah in a subsequent letter. "I think they are really sorry. Only yesterday the Vicar said, 'God has strange ways of visiting us with trouble. We must take it that He means it for the best, impossible though it is for us to see what good can come of it.' I had never realized," was Hannah's comment, "that he was as broad-minded as this, and it has given me much help. I hope you are taking every care of yourself and that the old farmer's wife is competent to give you good advice upon what you ought to do. You say you are still working on the farm. Is that wise? Mother used

THE GREEN BOUGH

to go to bed every day for an hour or so before you were born. I remember it so well. Oh, Mary, why did you ever let it happen?"

Why? Why? Why had God ever found such favor in her in preference to them? That was all she asked herself.

One day a letter lay on her plate at breakfast. It was readdressed from Bridnorth and was in Liddiard's handwriting. For long she debated whether she would open it or not. What memories might it not revive? What wound might it not open, even the scar of which she could hardly trace by now?

Her child had no father. Touch with Liddiard's mind again in those moments might make her wish he had; might make her wish she had a hand to hold when her hour should come; might make her need the presence of some one close that she might not feel so completely alone.

Yet even nursing these thoughts, her fingers had torn the envelope without volition; her eyes had turned to the paper without intent.

"I have heard from your sister Jane," he wrote. "She tells me she thinks I ought to know what is happening to you. She writes bitterly in every word as though I had cast you off to bear the burden of this alone. God knows that is not true. In the first letter I wrote you after I left Bridnorth, if you have kept it, you will find how earnestly I assured you I would, in such an event, do all I could. Where are you and why have you never appealed to me? Surely I could have helped and so willingly I would. Wherever you are, won't you let me come

THE GREEN BOUGH

and see you? One of these days, of course without mentioning your name, I shall tell my wife everything. I have some feeling in my heart she will understand."

That same day, Mary answered his letter.

"Please take no notice of my sister Jane. She would punish you as she has punished me. That is her view of what has happened. I know you would do all you could. It hurts me a little to hear you think I should doubt it. Do not worry about me. I am away in the country and intensely happy. Never was I so happy. Never I expect will I be quite so happy again. You have nothing to fret yourself about. It would cast some kind of shadow over all this happiness if I thought you were. You have no cause for it. I shall always be grateful to you. I do not put my address at the head of this letter, because somehow I fear you would come to see me, however strong my wishes were that you should not."

"'Ee's thoughtful, Maiddy," Mrs. Peverell said to her when she returned from posting her letter in Lonesome Ford.

"Am I?"

"'Ee've had a letter from him."

"How did you know?"

"How do my Peverell know there'd be rain acomin'? He says he feels it in his bones. Men's bones and women's hearts be peculiarsome things."

IV

IT was a boy. Full in the month of March he came, with a storm rushing across the fields where the rooks already were gathering in the elm trees and the first, dull red of blossom was flushing the winter black of the branches against the clouds of thunder blue.

High as was the cry of that southwest wind, sweeping the trees and rattling the windows in their casements, his first cry beneath the thatch of Yarningdale Farm uplifted above every other sound in the ears of Mrs. Peverell and Mary as they heard it.

The doctor who attended her from Henley-in-Arden had proposed an anæsthetic.

"Your first child," he said. "It'll just make things easier."

Had her pain been less she would have spoken for herself. Had she spoken, a cry might have escaped with the words between her lips. She looked across at Mrs. Peverell who knew her mind and she shook her head.

"She wants it just natural," said the farmer's wife.

"'Ee can see for 'eeself she's strong. 'Tain't no hide and seek affair with her."

"It's going to be a bit worse than she thinks," muttered the doctor.

THE GREEN BOUGH

"Can't be worse'n a woman thinks," retorted Mrs. Peverell. "Let 'ee mind as carefully as 'ee can what she feels — what she thinks'll be beyond 'ee or me."

Peverell came back from plowing at midday with the clods of earth on his boots.

"Come there be no rain to-night," said he. "I'll have that corn sown in to-morrow."

"We have our harvest in upstairs a'ready," said she.

He wheeled round in his chair with his eyes wide upon her.

"Damn it!" he exclaimed. "I'd complete forgot our maidy on her birth-bed."

She gazed at him a moment in silence, with words unspoken in her glance he had uncomfortable consciousness of, yet did not know one instant all they meant. It left him with a disagreeable sense of inferiority, just when he had been congratulating himself on a piece of work well done.

"'Ee won't forget when 'ee sows the seed to-morrow in that field," said she quietly. "Come time 'ee has it broadcast sown, the sweat'll be on thy brow, an' 'ee limbs be aching." She lifted the corner of her apron significantly. "I've wiped the sweat off her brow and laid her body comfortable in the bed and now I'll get the meat to put in 'ee stomach."

He knew he had made some grievous error somewhere. Forgetting their maidy and her babe upstairs no doubt. He ate the food she brought him in silence, like a child aware of disgrace; but why it should be so, just because he had forgotten about a woman having

THE GREEN BOUGH

a baby was more than he could account for. It was not as if it had been a slack day or a Sabbath. That ground was just nice and ready for the wheat to go in. Still, it was no good saying anything. He had hurt her feelings some way and there was an end of it. He knew well that steady look in the sunken eyes, the set line, a little tighter drawn in the thin lips.

It worried him as he ate his meal. It always worried him. Somehow it seemed to make the food taste dry in his mouth. It had no such succulence as when all was just right, and he had come in for his dinner after a hard morning's work. For never by conscious word had he hurt her. Never, in all the thirty-seven years they had been married, had there been an instant's intent in him to make her suffer.

It was in these unaccountable ways, in chance words, harmless enough in all conscience to him, in little things he did and little things he left undone, that this look she had, came in these sudden moments into her face.

"Women be queer cattle," he would say to himself. "There be no ways treatin' 'em alike. 'Ee might think 'ee'd got 'em goin' one way when round they'll come and go t'other."

As a rule this silent summary of the whole sex would satisfy him in regard to the one in particular he had in mind. With a sweep of his hand across his mouth after his meal was over, he would go back to his work and once his feet felt the fields beneath them, he would forget all about it.

Somehow this time he seemed to know there was

THE GREEN BOUGH

little hope of forgetting. Whether it was his food tasted drier than usual; whether some meaning of what she had said about the sweat on his brow and the sweat of her who labored upstairs there with her child had reached with faint rays of illumination to his appreciative mind, whatever it was, the fields called in vain to him.

He was restless, uneasy. Without cause he knew of, he felt a little ashamed. Rising from the table, he moved about the room lighting his pipe. He felt like some child with a lie or a theft upon his conscience. When his pipe was well lit and hard rammed down, finding he had no patience to sit awhile as was his custom, he went in search of his wife.

From something she had said about making as little noise as possible, he knew she was not upstairs with her patient. If he asked her straight out, perhaps she would tell him what was the matter, what he had said, what possibly he had done.

She was not in the scullery. Softly he opened the door of the larder and looked in. She was not there. With his heart beating in unaccustomed pulses he crept upstairs to their bedroom, thinking to himself, "Plowed fields be better walking for the likes of me."

"Mother," he whispered, and opened the door.

She was not there.

In despair he turned to the stairs again, drawing a deep breath when he reached the bottom. Only the parlor was left, unless she were out of the house alto-

THE GREEN BOUGH

gether. He looked in. It was empty. He was turning away when there caught his attention the unusual sight of the big Bible lying open on the table. He crossed the room to look at it. Was it so bad she'd had to be reading some of that?

It was opened at the first, clean page. No printing was on it, but there in ink, still wet, was written in her handwriting—"John Throgmorton, at Yarningdale, March 17th, 1896."

Some idea flashed out from that page as he leant over it. It reached some hitherto unused function of perception in his brain. He knew now why that look had come into her eyes. He knew even what it was he had said, or rather what he had forgotten to say that had hurt her. All this was reminding her how she wanted a child of her own. But had he not wanted one too? Was not the loss as much his that he had no son to take the handles of the plow when his hands had ceased to hold them?

He turned as she entered the room with a piece of blotting paper she had fetched from his desk in the kitchen where he wrote out his accounts.

"Mother," he said, and he fidgeted with his hands, "I know what's worryin' 'ee. I ought t'have thought of it afore now, but we been past it these many years, it had gone out o' my head for the moment. B'lieve me I've wanted one same as 'ee."

She knew he was a good man as she looked at him, but could not think of that then.

"I've wanted 'ee to have fair crops," said she, "but

THE GREEN BOUGH

it's only been disappointment to me when they've failed. Yet I've seen it make 'ee feel 'ee was not man enough for the task God had set 'ee."

With a steady hand, she blotted the page and shut the book, then taking him by the arm, she led him out of the room and closed the door.

"There's one of them young black minorcas has the croup," said she.

"They be plaguy things," he replied.

V

TALKING of the future one day with Mrs. Peverell, Mary had said that if it were a boy, his name must be John. So definite had she been in her decision about this, that without further question the good woman had written it in the big Bible.

"John's a man's name," Mary had said; "there's work in it." Then, dismissing her smile and speaking still more earnestly, she had continued, "If anything were to happen to me, I should leave him to you. Would you take him?"

The sunken eyes were quite steady before the gaze they met.

"How could we give 'en the bringin' up?" she asked.

"He shall have no bringing up but this," Mary had replied. "I told you first of all I didn't come here to hide. I chose this place because I knew I could touch life here and make him all I wanted him to be. This is what I want him, a good man and a true man and a real one, like your husband. I want him to know that he owes all to the earth he works in. What money I have shall be yours to keep and clothe him. Indeed I hope nothing will happen for I know so well what I

THE GREEN BOUGH

want him to be. I've always known it, it seems to me now. I've only realized it these last few months. Milking these cows, walking in the meadows, living here on this farm, I've learnt to realize it. Giving is life. We can't all give the same thing, but it is in the moment of giving that most we feel alive. Acquiring, possessing, putting a value on things and hoarding them by, there's only a living death, a stagnant despair and discontent in that."

"'Ee's talkin' beyond me," said Mrs. Peverell watching her. "'Ee's well taught at school and 'ee's talkin' beyond me. I never had no learnin' what I got of use to me out of books. But come one day an' another, I've learnt that wantin' things may help 'ee gettin' 'em, but it stales 'em when they come. All I could have given my man, ain't there for givin'. God knows best why. Most willing would I have gone wi'out life to give 'en a child to patter its feet on these bricks. He doant know that. I wouldn't tell 'en. He'd say there warn't no sense in my talkin' that way. Men want life to live by, but it seems to me sometimes death's an easy thing to a woman when it comes that way. I s'pose it's what 'ee'd call the moment of givin' and doant seem like death to her."

Mary had leant forward, stretching out her hand and taking the knotted knuckles in her fingers.

"You haven't lost much," she had said, "by not having my advantage of education. What you've just said is bigger than any learning could make it. I don't think we speak any more of truth because we have

THE GREEN BOUGH

more words to express it with. I'm sure we think less. Do you think I could find any one better to teach him than you? It is women who teach. Your husband will show him the way, but you will give him that idea in his heart to take it. I long so much to give it to him myself that I haven't your courage. Sometimes I'm afraid I may die. I don't let it have any power over me but sometimes I confess I'm afraid, because you see I want to give him more than his life. I want to give him his ideals. Perhaps that's because I've no one else to give him to. My life won't seem complete unless I can live beyond that. Anyhow I wanted to say this. If I have to give him, I want it to be to you and I want you to know that that is how I wish him to be brought up. If he has big things in life to give, he'll find them out. He'll leave the 'farm. Perhaps he'll break your heart in leaving — perhaps he'll break mine if I live, but I want him first to learn from the earth itself the life there is in giving and then, let it be what it may, for him to give his best."

Mrs. Peverell nodded her head to imply understanding.

"It's them as doant suffer can talk about sin," she had said, which by no means was Mary's train of thought, though her words had somehow suggested it to Mrs. Peverell's range of comprehension. "I should have called all this sin years ago. Didn't I say 'twas sin when first 'ee told me? Well, it beats me what sin is. 'Tain't what I thought it. We be born with it,

THE GREEN BOUGH

they say. Well, if the babes I seen be born with sin, 'tain't what any one thinks it."

It was obvious Mrs. Peverell had not followed her in the flight of her hopes and purposes. The right and the wrong of it, the pain and the joy of it, these were all that her mind grasped. But these she grasped with a clearness of vision that assured Mary's heart of a safe guardianship if ill should befall her. Such a clearness of vision it was as set her high above many of the women she had known.

How was that? What was it about women that so few of them had any vision at all? To how many she knew would she entrust her child? Often she had listened in amazement to Hannah instructing the children at home. She remembered the mistresses where she had been at school herself. She recalled her mother's advice to her when she had left school. Everywhere it was the same.

Only here and there where a woman had suffered at the hands of life did vision seem to be awakened in her. Many were worldly, many were shrewd and clever enough in their dealings with circumstance. But how few there were who knew of any purpose in their souls beyond that of dressing their bodies for honest vanity's sake, or marrying suitably for decent comfort's sake.

Here, was it again the force-made laws, the laws by which men set a paled and barbed fence about the possessions they had won? Were all these women their possessions too, as little capable of freedom of thought

THE GREEN BOUGH

as were of action their dogs, their horses, the cattle on their hedged-in fields?

She had heard of votes for women in those days. In Bridnorth as in most places it was a jest. What would they do with the vote when they had it? They laughed with the rest. Women in Parliament! They would only make fools of themselves with their trembling voices raised in a company of men.

She could not herself quite see all that the vote might mean. Little may that be wondered at, seeing that when they obtained it, there would be countless among them who still would be ignorant of its worth and power. Whatever it might mean, she knew in those days that her sex had little of the vision of the ideal; she knew it was little aware of the true values and meanings of life, that thousands of her sisters wasted out their days in ceaseless pandering to the acquisitive passions of men.

"'Ee's thinkin' long and deep, maidy," Mrs. Peverell had said when the silence after her last remarks had closed about them. "Are 'ee wonderin' after all this time what the sin of it might be? Are 'ee thinkin' what the Vicar'll say when 'ee has to explain it all to 'en."

"Why must I tell him?" asked Mary.

"Don't 'ee want the child baptized?"

With all the thoughts she had had, with all the preparation she had made, she had not thought of this. The habit of her religion was about her still. Every Sunday morning she had sat with the Peverells in the

THE GREEN BOUGH

pew it was their custom to occupy. Something there was in religion no clearness of vision seemed able to destroy.

“He must be baptized,” she had said and turned in their mind to face once more the difficulties with which the world beset her.

VI

THE upbringing of John Throgmorton at Yarningdale Farm has more of the nature of an idyll in it than one is wont to ask for in a modern world, where idylls are out of fashion and it has become the habit to set one's teeth at life.

Still continuing, as soon as she was strong again, to fulfill the duties of milkmaid for Mr. Peverell, Mary spent all her spare time with her child. No fretting mother she was, but calm and serene in all her doings. He took no fever of spirit from her.

"Seems as if the milk she give him must almost be cool," said Mrs. Peverell to her husband, who now, since the registration of John's birth had had to be told the truth — that there was no father — that Mary was one of those women who had gone astray.

"Fair, she beats me," he replied. "Ain't there no shame to her? Not that I want to see her shamed. But it 'mazes me seein' her calm and easy like this. Keep them cows quiet, I told her when she 'gan amilkin' — keep 'em easy. Don't fret 'em. They'll give 'ee half as much milk again if 'ee don't fret 'em. And when the flies were at 'en last summer, dommed if she didn't get more milk than that lad could have got. That's where she's learnt it. She ain't frettin' herself

THE GREEN BOUGH

when most women 'ud be hangin' their heads and turn-in' the milk to water in their breasts wi' shame. I doant make her out and that's the truth of it."

Yet he had made her out far better than he knew. That was where she had learnt the secret, as she had intended she should learn all the secrets it was possible to know. On sunny days she took her baby with her into the fields where the cows were grazing.

One by one on the first of these occasions, solemnly she showed them the treasure she brought. Sponsors, they were, she told them, having had recent acquaintance with that word. One by one they stared with velvet eyes at the bundle that was presented to them.

When that ceremony was over, solemnly proclaimed with words the written word can give no meaning to, she found for herself a sheltered corner in the hedgerow, there unfastening her dress and with cool fingers lifting her breast for his lips to suckle where none could watch her. The warm spring air on those sunny days was no less food for him than the milk she gave. With gurgling noises he drew it in. With round, dark eyes, set fast with the purposes of life, he took his fill as she gazed upon him.

That there was nothing more wonderful to a woman than this, Mary knew in all the certainty of her heart. There alone with her baby, she wanted no other passion, no other love, no other company. This for a woman was the completeness of fulfillment. Yet this it was that men denied to so many.

She knew then in those moments that no shame

THE GREEN BOUGH

would be too great to bear with patience for such realization of life as this. Realization it was and, to fail in knowing it, was like a fallow field to have yielded naught but a harvest of weeds in which there was shame indeed.

Often in the previous summer she had heard Mr. Peverell bitterly accusing himself for the bare and weedy patches in his crops. Twice since she had been there on the farm had a barren cow been sent to market for sale because it was of no use to them. They had been cows she herself had named. She had fretted when they were driven away and had taken herself far from the yard when it came to the moment of their departure.

Yet no word of pleading had she said to Mr. Peverell on such occasions. Receive and give, these were the laws she recognized and found no power of sentiment strong enough in her to make her seek or need to disobey them. Gain and keep — against such principles as these her soul had caparisoned and armed itself, clearly knowing how all laws in the operation must carry with them the savor of injustice, uncomplaining if that injustice should be measured for her portion. For never so great an injustice could it be as that which men in their ideals of possession and inheritance had meted out to women. Living there at Yarningdale Farm so close to the land, she had found a greater beneficence in Nature than in all the organized charity of mankind.

On the second occasion when the barren cow had

THE GREEN BOUGH

been sent to market some delay had been made in her departure and Mary had returned to the house just as the flurried beast had been driven out of the yard. With head averted, she had quickened her steps into the house, finding Mrs. Peverell looking out of the window in the parlor kitchen.

"Why are they drivin' that cow to market?" she asked. "He said naught to me 'bout sellin' a cow to-day."

"She's barren," said Mary. "They sent her four times to the bull. I've milked her nearly dry now. It does seem hard, doesn't it? She was so quiet. But I'm afraid she's no good to us."

She had been taking off her hat as she spoke, never appreciating the significance of what she said when, in a moment, she became conscious of Mrs. Peverell's silence and swiftly turned round.

She was standing quite motionless with one hand resting on the back of a chair, staring out of the window at the departing beast, yet seeing nothing, for, with a searching steadfastness, her eyes were looking inwards.

For a moment Mary's presence of mind had left her. She had swayed in movement, half coming forward when indecision had arrested her. It might not be that her thoughts were what Mary supposed. To comfort her for them if they were not there was only to put them in her mind.

"What are you thinking of?" she inquired tentatively.

THE GREEN BOUGH

"I be thinkin'," said Mrs. Peverell, "if he gets a good price for that cow we'd have a new lot o' bricks laid down in that wash-house. There be holes there a body might fall over in the dark."

A thousand times more bitter was this than the truth, for still she stood staring inwards with her thoughts and still standing there, with her hand on the back of the chair and her eyes gazing through the window, Mary had left her and gone upstairs.

VII

SOON after John was born, there had come a letter from Hannah saying that she and Fanny were going to stay with friends in Yorkshire and on their way intended to visit her whether she liked it or not.

"Every one knows we're going to Yorkshire," she had written, "so they won't guess we've broken the journey."

Mary smiled. Almost it was unbelievable to her now that once she herself had thought like that. Absolutely and actually unreal it seemed to her now that the human body could so be led and persuaded by the thoughts of its mind.

"Come," she wrote back. "We shall be proud to see you."

"Proud!" said Hannah, reading that. "It almost seems as if she meant to say she was proud of herself. I know she's not ashamed — but proud?"

"P'r'aps that's what she does mean," said Fanny. "Though without love, it doesn't seem to me she's got anything to be proud about."

Sharply Hannah looked at Fanny, for since these events had happened in the square, white house, there had grown a keener glance in the quiet nature of Hannah's eyes.

THE GREEN BOUGH

"Don't tell me, Fanny," she whispered, "don't tell me you'd go and do the same?"

"I'd do anything for love!" exclaimed Fanny hysterically. "Anything I'd do—but it would have to be for love."

Hannah went away to her room to pack, considering how swiftly the rupture of the moral code can break down the power of principle.

"Fanny was never like that before," she muttered as she gathered her things. "At least she would never have said it. Mary's done more harm than ever she knows. Poor Mary! She can't really be proud—that's only her pride."

Yet proud indeed they found she was. At the end of the red brick path leading up to the house between the beds now filled with wallflowers, she greeted them with her baby in her arms. This was her challenge. So they must accept her. It was not to be first herself as though nothing had happened and then her child as though what must be, must be borne with. It was they two or never, sisters though they might be, would she wish to see them.

Her first thought, as they stepped out of the village fly that brought them, was how old and pinched and worn they looked. For youth now had come back to her with the youth she carried in her arms. Thirty she was then, yet felt a child beside them. For one instant at the sight of her her heart ached for Fanny. Fanny, she knew, was the one whom the sight of her child would hurt the most. But the contact of greet-

THE GREEN BOUGH

ing, the lending him to them for their arms to hold, deep though her heart was filled with pity for them, in that moment there was yet the deeper welling of her pride.

He won them, as well she knew he would. In Hannah's arms, he looked up with his deep, black eyes into hers and made bubbles with his lips. No woman could have resisted him and she, who never would have child of her own, clung to him in a piteous weakness of emotion.

Fanny stood by, with jerking laughter to hide her eagerness, muttering — "Let me have him, Hannah. Let me take him a moment now."

And when in turn she held him, then above Mary's pride that already had had its fill, there rose the consciousness of all her sister was suffering. Twitching with emotion were Fanny's lips as she kissed him. Against that thin breast of hers she held him fast as though she felt for him to give her the sense of life. Not even a foolish word such as Hannah had murmured in his ears was there in her heart to say to him. It was life she was holding so close; life that had never been given her to touch; life, even borrowed like this, that had the power to swell the sluggish race of her blood to flooding; life that stung and hurt and smarted in her eyes, yet made her feel she was a woman in whom the purpose of being might yet be fulfilled.

Unable any longer to bear the sight of that, Mary turned away into the house to prepare their coming.

THE GREEN BOUGH

John, she left in Fanny's arms, having no heart to rob her of him then.

"They've come," she whispered to Mrs. Peverell.
"They've come."

"Well?" she inquired. "Was it to shame 'ee?"

For answer Mary took her by the arm and led her to the window.

"Look," she said, and pointed out over the bowl of daffodils on the window sill, down the red brick path to the gate in the oak palings. And that which Mrs. Peverell beheld was the sight of two women, no longer young, lost to all sense of foolishness in their behavior, emotionalized beyond control, swept beyond self-criticism by a thing, all young with life, that kicked its bare legs and crowed and bubbled at its lips, then lying still, lay looking at them with great eyes of wisdom as though in wonder at their folly.

They stayed till later that afternoon, then caught an evening train to Manchester. Mary travelled a mile with them in the old fly, then set out to walk home alone.

"Don't tire yourself," said Hannah, leaning out of the window, as they drove away. "You must still take care."

"Tire myself?" Mary cried back. "I don't feel as if I could ever be tired again."

And still leaning out of the window, watching her with her firm stride as she disappeared into the wood, Hannah knew their sister had found a nearer stream to the heart of life than ever that which flowed through Bridnorth.

VIII

DAYS, months and years went by and with each moment of them, Mary gave out of herself the light of her ideals for that green bough to grow in.

Still as ever, she continued with her work on the farm, one indeed of them now, and when he could walk, took John with her to fetch the cows, exacting patience from him while he sat there in the stalls beside her watching her milk.

"We have to work, John," she said. "You and I have to work. I shall never disturb you when you're plowing or dropping the seeds in the ground. Work's a holy thing, John. Do you know that? You wouldn't come and disturb me while I was saying my prayers, would you?"

Solemnly John shook his head. He knew too well he always held his breath, because then she had told him God was in the room.

"Is God in the shed here now, while you're milking?" he asked.

She nodded an affirmative to give him the impression that so close God was she dared not speak aloud.

"Does He get thirsty when He sees all that milk in the pail?"

THE GREEN BOUGH

She bit her lips from laughter and shook her head again. That was a moment when many a mother would have taken him in her arms for the charm he had. She would not spoil him so. She would not let him think he said quaint things and so for quaintness' sake or the attention he won by them, set out his childish wits to gain approval. Nothing should he wish to gain. All that he gave of himself he must give without thought of its reward.

"God's never hungry or thirsty, except through us," she said. "God is in pain when we're in pain. He's happy when we're happy. Everything we feel is what God is feeling because He's everywhere and close to all of us."

John's eyes cast downwards to the bucket where the milk was frothing white.

"He's feeling thirsty now then," said he meditatively.

"I've no doubt He is," said Mary. "But He knows the milk doesn't belong to Him. He knows the milk belongs to Mr. Peverell and Mrs. Peverell will give Him some at tea-time."

For a long while John thought over this. The milk hissed into the pail as Mary watched him with her cheek against the still, warm flank.

"What is it, John?" she asked presently. "What are you thinking?"

"I feel so sorry for God," said he.

"Always feel that," she whispered, seizing eagerly the odd turn of his mind. "He wants your pity as

THE GREEN BOUGH

well as your love, little John. He wants the best you have. He's always in you. He's never far away. And if sometimes it seems that He is, then come and give your best to me. I promise you I'll give it back to Him."

Tenderly, by his heart she led him, bringing him ever on tiptoe to every wonder in life, whilst all in Nature he found wonderful through her eyes. Supplying herself with everything in literature she could find on subjects of natural history, recalling thereby such memories as she had of bird's nesting and woodland adventures with her brother, it was these books she read now. They held her interest as never a storybook had held it those days in Bridnorth when the old coach rumbled up the cobbled street. John caught the vital energy of her excitement whenever in the fields and hedges she discovered the very documents of Nature she had read of on the printed page.

No eggs were allowed to be taken from the nests. No collection of things was made.

"They're all ours where they are," she would say. "Men who study these things to write about them in the books I read, they're the only ones who can take them. They give them all back again in their books."

He did not understand this, but learnt obedience.

Time came when he himself could climb a tree and peer within a nest. Down on the ground below, Mary would stand with heart dry on her lips, yet bidding him no more than care of the places where he put his feet.

THE GREEN BOUGH

Never should he know fear, she determined, never through her.

So she brought him up and to the life of the farm as well. With Mr. Peverell he spent many of his days. In the hayfields and at harvest time, the measure of his joys was full. He knew the scent of good hay from bad before ever he could handle a rake to gather it. He saw the crops thrashed. He saw them sown. In all the procession of those years, the coming and going, the sowing and harvest, the receiving and the giving of life became the statutory values of his world.

And there beside him, ever at his listening ear, was Mary to give him the simple purpose of his young ideals.

He never knew he learnt. He never realized the soil he grew in. Up to the light he came, the light she gave him from the emotion of her own ideals; up to the light like a sapling tree, well planted in the wood, with space and air to stretch its branches to the sun.

"Mummy, what's death?" he asked her one day as he sat with her while she milked the cows. "What's death?"

For a long time she continued with her milking in silence. She had taught him never to bother for an answer to his questions and only to ask again when he made sure his question had not been heard. Now he leant up against the stall waiting in patience, watching her face. Peeping at her then when making sure she had not heard, he asked once more.

"Mummy, what's death? Is that too soon?"

THE GREEN BOUGH

She smiled and pressed his hand with her own that was warm and wet with milk.

"Why do you ask that, John?" she inquired.

"There were two moles got chopped with the hay knives. I saw them. They were lying in a lump and all bloody and still. Is that death? Mr. Peverell said they was quite dead. Is death being quite dead?"

She shook her head and went back to her milking; still for a while in silence.

These were moments she feared, yet had no real dread of, seeing they had to be. Here was a young twig seeking to the light, a young twig that one day would become a branch and must be set in surest purpose or in the full growth, sooner or later, would reveal its stunted lines and the need there had been for vision in its training.

"Death's not the same as being dead," she said presently. "Nothing is quite dead." She stripped her cow, the last that evening and, putting the pail aside from long habits of precaution, she turned and took both his hands in hers.

"Do you know what a difficult question you've asked me, John?" she said.

He shook his head.

"You have, and awfully badly I want to answer it. I could quite easily if you were a little bit older. I'm so afraid I can't make it simple enough for you to understand now. And if I told you something you didn't understand, you'd make your own understanding of it and it might be all wrong."

THE GREEN BOUGH

"Only want to know about the moles," said he.

"Yes, I know. But what's happened to the moles happens to people."

"When?"

"Oh, all sorts of times. They get caught in the mowing knives."

"But can't they tie themselves up with bits of rag and make it all right and stop the bleeding?"

"Not when it cuts into their hearts, they can't. Even a whole tablecloth couldn't stop the bleeding then."

"What happens then?"

"They get all still like the moles."

"And are they dead then?"

"No, that's where it's so difficult to explain. If I were to say—that's death, but they're not dead—how could you understand?"

"Couldn't," he agreed, and leant his head up against her cheek, sympathizing with her difficulties. "I've always thought death was being quite dead."

"Nothing's quite dead," she repeated, half to herself, as though by the reiteration of that she might capture out of the void the inspiration for what she wanted to say.

"Do you remember what I told you about God?" she asked suddenly.

He nodded his head.

"Well, when things go quite still, they've gone back to God. They can't feel thirsty then, or tired or un-

THE GREEN BOUGH

happy. They haven't got any bodies to feel tired or thirsty with."

"But what does God do with all the dead things and people?"

Mary clasped her courage and went on.

"He just lets them rest," she said, "rest till they're ready to bear being thirsty and tired again."

"Were the moles so thirsty or so tired that they couldn't bear it any more?"

"They may have been. You can never know when God chooses to take you back again. Life, the thing that makes you move about and laugh and run, the thing that makes you able to bear being thirsty, you can give that back to God just when you feel strongest."

"What would you give it back for?"

"Something that was worth while. Suppose you and I were out for a walk together and I fell in the river and I couldn't swim and I was nearly going to be drowned and be quite still, because when you're under the water you can't breathe and that's another thing that makes you go quite still, what would you do?"

"I'd jump in and I'd swim and I'd take you in my arms and I'd swim with my legs and I'd get to the bank and then I'd pull you out and I'd call to Mr. Peverell."

He felt the tightening of her arm about him.

"But supposing I was too heavy and yet you still held on and I dragged you down under the water with me and you couldn't breathe and became quite still — then you'd have given the thing that had made you run

THE GREEN BOUGH

to the bank and jump into the water, you'd have given it back to God."

"That would have been worth while, Mummy," said he.

"Would it, John?"

"Well, what would have been the good of going on looking for birds' eggs or making the hay or getting up in the morning if you'd been quite still?"

"So I fill your life, do I?" she whispered.

"No fun if you were like the moles," said he without sentiment.

And this, she thought of a sudden, is what so many women are denied, this actual virtue of being the very essence of the whole world to one little, living body that had not a lover's sentiments and passions to urge upon its mind, but stood alone absorbed, contained in its beliefs.

"Well, then, if you gave it back to God for something like that that seemed worth while, it would not be because you were tired then — would it?"

"No — I shouldn't want no rest. Shouldn't want to be quite still for long."

She lifted him up swiftly into her arms, a sudden sight of him quite still chilling through her blood.

"If you gave it back, generously, like that, my darling," she whispered, "He might accept it like Mr. Peverell always does when you give him an apple out of his own orchard. You always find it on your plate again next morning."

"Has God a beard like Mr. Peverell?" he asked.

IX

IT was when John came to the age of eleven that Mary first learnt the pangs of jealousy.

A neighboring farm came into the market one Michaelmas and was bought by a young farmer bringing a wife and three children to the house that lay in the trees at the bottom of the Highfield meadow. No one knew why it was called Highfield, that meadow. It had been so called for centuries, yet it lay low. A brook ran through it. Some winters it lay under water. A kind of rush grew thick in the grass in one corner under the poplar trees. Every year it was put down for hay. Every year, so damp the soil, it grew a generous crop.

Farms so close together as Mr. Kemp's and Mr. Peverell's lend each other a helping hand. There is only a friendly rivalry between those whose hearts are in the soil. The spirit of giving maintains if it does not rule. Mr. Peverell's crops were generally better to his way of thinking than any one else's. But he loved the sight of a well grown field nevertheless. He wished no harm but the best to any man who tilled and cleansed his land.

"Cultivation," he said, "that's taking side wi' Nature. Weeds is folly and Nature can't abide that. A field run fallow makes my stomach turn."

THE GREEN BOUGH

It was at the haymaking in the Highfield meadow, when the womenfolk, and at lifting time the men as well, came in to help, that John first met Lucy Kemp.

She was a year younger than he; dark haired with solemn, wondering eyes that gazed with steady glances at the world.

In the midst of his frolics in the new cut hay, John came suddenly before those eyes, not knowing what he saw, ceased from his antics in a swift arrest.

"What are you looking at?" he asked with uncere-
monious directness.

"Looking at you," said she.

He glanced down at his clothes to see if anything was wrong.

"What's the matter with me?" he inquired.

"I like you," she replied.

"Why?"

"Cos you can stop playing all quick, like this, when you play."

She must have had some vague conception of what she meant. He must have had some vague conception of what he understood. It was the first time it had ever been made apparent to him that any one could like him as well as his mother.

"Aren't you going to play?" he asked.

"I've got a headache," she replied.

"What's that?"

"A pain — all over here!" She laid her hands across her forehead.

"Does it hurt?"

THE GREEN BOUGH

He gave sympathy in his voice at once.

"Keeps on frobbing," said she.

"Let God feel it frob and come and play," he suggested with greater wisdom than he knew.

That had to be explained to her. They sat down in the hay, the first man in him explaining the mysteries of life to the first woman in her. Mary found them, fast friends, sitting together behind a high cock of hay.

"I thought I'd lost you, John," she said, and when he did not look up on the instant, knew she had indeed lost something of him she could never find again. No longer was she the only woman in his world. In a strange and unexpected moment he had found some one he could turn to to hide his pain if she became quite still like the moles.

They met often after that day. In a little while they became inseparable.

"Young things must have young things to play with," Mary told herself. It was Nature. They never reared young calves alone on the farm. Always they had companions.

"They grows better," said Mr. Peverell. "Young and young. It comes that way."

So she stilled her heart from painful beating. But one day Mrs. Peverell pointed out those two together in the fields and said —

"A love child they say takes easy to love. If that doant please 'ee, 'ee must stop it soon."

"Why shouldn't it please me?" she asked and her heart was trembling in swift flutterings that were not

THE GREEN BOUGH

pulses in her breast, but were like wings beating, disturbing the air she breathed.

"Well, she be just an ordinary child, like one of us, and if John stays on the farm and one day takes it after Mr. Peverell, as I doant mind tellin' 'ee Mr. Peverell means 'en to take it if he likes the work, then he'll wed wi' her, you mark my words for it."

Mary took the hand with its knuckles far more knotted now and held it for comfort against her breast.

"You have been good to me," she muttered thickly. "I have never thought till now he could mean to leave the farm to John."

"His name's in the Bible," said Mrs. Peverell.

"Yes, yes, my dear, I know what that means to you. But I never thought you meant it so practically as that. If John does take on the farm, why shouldn't he marry Lucy? Wouldn't that be right? Wouldn't that be the very best?"

"I thought by the way 'ee looked at them 'ee mind was all against it. I thought 'ee'd got greater prospects for him than that. She's only an ordinary child, I says, and that's all she is. I thought it 'ud upset 'ee plans for 'en."

"My plans," said Mary. "They're only for his happiness and the best that's in him. I can't have him always, can I? Not always to myself?" She turned her eyes across the field to where they stood together.

"She's come — with her big eyes," she whispered and she walked away.

PHASE V

I

IT was a still hot day at the end of the month of July in the following year. Vast mountain ranges of cumulus clouds too heavy on the horizon to sweep across the sky with the storm they promised hung sullen and low in masses of pale purple rimmed with golden pink. Rain was sadly wanted all the country round. Only the Highfield meadow at Yarningdale was lush and green. The cows were there grazing on the aftermath.

With her sewing, Mary had come down to the field an hour or more before there was need to drive them in. John was playing with Lucy down the stream. She could hear their voices in and out of the willows. They were like dryad and faun, laughing together. His voice was as a lute to Mary. She listened to it and to the very words he said, as she would have listened to a faun playing on his pipe, half bewitched by it, half tricked to laughter and to joy that was scarcely of this world.

"If I'm the captain," she heard him saying, "you have to dance whether you like it or not."

Claude Duval and Treasure Island! Both flung together in the melting pot of his fancy.

She peered down the field through the trunks of the

THE GREEN BOUGH

pollarded willows and saw a dryad dancing before a faun sitting cross-legged in the grass. A fay-looking sight it was in the hazy mist of that sunshine. With unsteady balance, Lucy swayed in and out of the tree shadows, alternately a thing of darkness and a thing of light. And there below her in the grass he sat, with his mop of hair and his profile cut sharp against the dark trunk of a willow tree, looking to Mary who saw him with the mist in his eyes like pagan Nature, back to the times of Pan. Herself as well, as there she watched, she felt she could have danced for him.

Was that what love was — the thing that she had never known? Could this be it, this godlike power that Nature lent to man to make a woman dance for him, and, as she danced, trick all his senses till he was no more than man, when Nature snatched her loan away and with Pan's laughter caught the woman in her arms and vanished in the trees and hid herself?

That moment then she seemed to see it so and with a later vision beheld the woman stepping out from underneath the shadows of the wood, leading a faun, so young his feet seemed scarcely touching the grass he walked upon.

Her sewing fluttered to her lap. In that midsummer heat, her eyes half closed, then opened, startled at the sound of solid footsteps by her side. She looked up and there stood Liddiard, his hat in his hand, a nervous smile upon his lips. She was too taken unawares to fathom them.

"Am I dreaming?" she muttered.

THE GREEN BOUGH

"You were asleep," said he.

"But this isn't dreaming?"

"No — you're awake now."

"Why — ? What is it? [Why have you come here?"]

"To see you."

"After all these years?"

"Twelve of them."

He sat down on the grass a little apart from her, watching her face.

"You look very little older, Mary. There isn't a gray hair in your head. I've plenty."

"My hair's nondescript," she replied, still in an amaze. "It takes a long time to go gray. Why have you come here? Did they tell you at Bridnorth where I was?"

"Yes."

"Then why have you come?"

"I told you, to see you."

"But what about?"

He smiled again as he watched her.

"You haven't changed at all, Mary. The same directness; the same unimpressible woman, the same insensitiveness to the delicate word. Does it give you no pleasure at all to think I should come back after all these years to see you?"

"Was I unimpressible once?" she asked quietly, and took no notice of the latter part of his sentence.

He looked away across the Highfield meadow and there between the willow trees he saw the mop of hair,

THE GREEN BOUGH

the sharp cut profile, the little figure half hidden by the grass, looking as though he grew out and was part of the very earth itself he sat on.

Liddiard looked back at Mary.

"Is that him?" he muttered.

She nodded her head and then of a sudden a fear, nameless and unreasonable, shook her through all her body.

"You came to see him," she whispered. "You came because of him. Didn't you? Didn't you?"

"How did you know?" he asked.

"How did I know?" Her throat gave out a sound like laughter; a mirthless sound that frightened her and awed him. "Shouldn't I know, better than him; better even than you? Wouldn't I know everything that touches him, touches him near and touches him far away? What do you want to see him for? He's nothing to do with you — nothing!"

"I know that, Mary. He's yours. He's nothing to do with me; but mightn't I have something to do with him?"

Fear sickened in her throat. She wet her lips and gathered her sewing from her lap as though she might run away; then laid it down again.

"Say what you mean," she said quickly. "I don't want delicate words. You're right. I never did. They break against me and in their pieces mean nothing. I want the words I can understand. What do you mean you might be something to him? What could you be? He's mine, all mine! I made him —

THE GREEN BOUGH

not you. I know I made him. I meant to. Every moment I meant to. It was just a moment of passion to you, a release of your emotions. It was ease it gave you — I can't help how I speak now — it was ease! It brought me the most wonderful pain in the world. You didn't want him! In that letter you wrote you talked about the consequences of passion! Consequences! My God! Is he no more than a consequence! A thing to be avoided! A thing, as you suggested, to be hidden away! I made him, I tell you — I meant to make him! I gave every thought in my mind and every pulse in my body to make him what he is while you were scheming in yours how the consequences of passion might be averted. What is the something you could be to him now after all these years? Where is the something any man can be to the child a woman brings into the world? Show me the man who, in such relationship as ours, will long for his child to be born, will give his passion, not for relief, but in full intent to make that child his own. Show me the man outside the convenience of the laws that he has made who will face the shame and ignominy he has made for himself and before all the world claim in his arms the thing he meant to create — then I'll admit he has something to do with the child he was the father of. Father! What delicate word that is! There's a word that breaks into a thousand little pieces against my heart. I don't know it! I don't understand it! I pick up the pieces and look at them and they mean nothing! Have you come after all these

THE GREEN BOUGH

years to tell me you're his father, because if you have, you're talking empty words to me."

A little shout of laughter fluttered down to them through the still air. She never heard it. The beating of her heart was all too loud. Scarcely knowing what she did, she picked up her sewing and went on with her work, while Liddiard stared before him down the field.

"I suppose you imagine," he said presently, "I suppose you imagine I don't feel the justice of every word you've said. You think I'm incapable of it."

She made no reply and he continued.

"I know what you say is quite true. I haven't come here to tell you I'm his father. I scarcely feel that I am. If I did, I wouldn't thrust it on you. But there's one thing you don't count in all you've said."

"What's that?" she sharply asked.

"For all that you made him, for all the thoughts and pulses that you gave, he stands alone. He is himself, apart from you or me. The world is in front of him whilst it's dropping behind us two."

Again she laid her sewing down. A deeper terror he had struck into her heart by that. That was true. She knew it was true. The coming of Lucy into that hayfield only the summer before was proof that it was true. He stood alone. She had said as much to Mrs. Peverell herself. "He'll give the best he has," she had said in effect. "Perhaps he'll leave the farm and break your heart. Perhaps if I live, he'll break mine." This was true. Whole-heartedly she hated Liddiard

THE GREEN BOUGH

for saying it. When all her claims were added up, John still stood by himself — alone.

"Go on," she whispered with intense quietness. "Say everything you've got to say. I'm listening."

He looked about him for reassurance, doubtful and ill at ease because of the note in her voice, yet set of purpose upon that for which he had come.

"I have told my wife everything," he began and paused. She bowed her head as he waited for a sign that she had heard.

"I told her a week ago to-day. My wife is now forty-seven. We have no children. We can have none. A week ago to-day we were discussing that; that I had no one, no one directly to whom I could leave Wenlock Hall. She knows what that place means to me. I think you know too. It was my father's and his father's. Well, it has been in the family for seven generations now. Each one of us has done something to it to improve it. In the Stuart period one of my ancestors built a chapel. Before then a wonderful tithe barn was built. It's one of the finest in England. The date is on one of the beams — 1618. The eldest son has always inherited. We've never broken the line. We were talking about it the other night. I was an only son. The property is not entailed. The next of kin is a cousin. He's the only male Liddiard. I'm not particularly fond of him, but he's the only Liddiard. I should leave it to him. My wife was saying what a pity it was. She wondered whose fault it could be. 'I believe it must be mine,' she said, 'and if it is, what can I do?'"

THE GREEN BOUGH

He paused again and looked long at Mary whose needle still with the finest of precision was passing in and out of the material in her hands.

"I told her what she could do," he added and met Mary's eyes as they looked up.

"What was that?" she asked quietly.

"I told her she could give our child a home and a name," said he, "if you would consent to let him go."

II

IT was in Mary's sensations as though, all unprepared, she had turned a sudden corner and found herself looking into an abyss, the darkness and depth of which was unfathomable. All sense of balance and equilibrium seemed to leave her. She reeled and was giddy in her mind. She could have laughed aloud. Her mental stance upon the plane of thought became a negation. Her grip was gone. She was floating, nebulously, foolishly, without power of volition to gravitate herself to a solid conception of anything.

He proposed to take John away from her. He was suggesting to her by every word he said that it was her duty to John to let him go. Not only could she laugh at the thought of it—she did. After all these twelve years when the whole of her life and John's too were planned out like a design upon a loom, needing only the spinning, she was to tear the whole fabric into shreds and fling it away! It was preposterous, unbelievable that he could have thought it worth while to come to her with such a suggestion. Yet she laughed, not because it was so ludicrous as to be unbelievable, but because Fate had so ordered it that, in a depth of her consciousness, she knew he could have done nothing else.

THE GREEN BOUGH

From the world's point of view it was the natural and inevitable sequence in an extraordinary chain of events. Many a woman would be glad of such an advancement for her son. Most conceivable it was that a man should desire his own flesh and blood to inherit and carry on in his name that of which the generations had made him proud. All this she realized. All this was the darkness and depth of the abyss into which she looked.

But then the sound of her laughter in her ears gave her hold again. More real than all worldly considerations became the cruelty it was to her. More real even than that was the destruction of the ideal she had cherished in her heart and nurtured and fed in John's.

His education was to have been the earth, the very soil his feet trod, not the riches that came out of that earth and more than the soft wet clay, soiled the hands of him who touched them. It was to give, not to enjoy; to labor, not to possess with which she had hedged him in upon his road to happiness and fulfillment. These were the realizations which, with the sound of her laughter, gave her hold again.

She saw the depth and darkness of that abyss, but shut her eyes to it. In full possession of herself, having gained equilibrium once more, she turned upon Liddiard with a scorn he had never seen in her.

"I'm forty now," she said, "and I don't think you'll deny that I have found and faced the world. In your sheltered place down there in Somerset, you can't maintain that you have met the world—as I've met it.

THE GREEN BOUGH

The real things have never threatened you to crush your spirit or break your courage as they have mine. Setting up a chapel or building a tithe barn aren't the real things of life. Keeping your lawns cut and your borders trimmed won't make England great or set in order the vast forces of life that govern us. Inheriting isn't creating, possession isn't power. You want to train my son to the thought that it is. For twelve years I've trained his little mind to the knowledge that it isn't. You want him to possess and enjoy. I want him to labor and live. You want him to inherit your pride. I want him to create his own. Doesn't it ever occur to you that since your family established itself in its possessions in Somersetshire, it's been decaying in purpose, decaying in spirit, decaying in power? Doesn't it ever occur to you that you're making no surplus of energy in that house of Liddiard, but by means of the laws of inheritance are living upon a little circle of energy that goes round and round, always dissipating itself with every generation, always becoming the lesser instead of the greater; creating no energy that is new, only using up that which is old; setting up chapels for itself and building itself tithe barns, always for itself, never making that energy really free for the whole world to profit by?"

Liddiard stood staring at her in amazement. She was not talking with the words of a woman. She was talking with the words of a force, a new force; something, coming up against which he felt himself puny and small and well-nigh impotent.

THE GREEN BOUGH

"You think I'm talking like a street orator," she said, justly reading that look. "Very probably I am to you. I know nothing of the social science, none of the facts for what I'm saying. I've never even said things like this before. I'm not picking my words. I'm only saying what I feel, what I believe all women are feeling in their hearts. One and all, if their thoughts were known, I believe they know they have contributed long enough to the possessive passions of men. Long enough they've been through the pains of birth and the greater pain of disappointment in their sons in order to give men children to inherit the possessions that are theirs. Long enough they've been servants, slaves even, to the ideals of men. The laws have been constructed to make and keep them so. The civilization of the world has been built up on the principle of 'get by force and keep by servitude.' The women who marry into royalty must breed or they are put away. That's what we do with the cows here on this farm. If they don't have calves and give milk, they're sent away to the market and they're sold. But do you really think you can keep women upon that plane of life forever? Here, at Yarningdale, I set my teeth and close my eyes when the cow is driven away. But do you suppose women are getting for themselves no more soul than that beast has? Do you think they're always quietly going to be driven away? Do you think they merely want to be stalled and well-fed for their efficient service? Do you think with men as they are, making love and passion a horror to some

THE GREEN BOUGH

women they marry, that we are forever going to believe they are fathers of our children and have supreme power to teach them none but their own ideals?"

She came a little closer to him as now they stood out there in the Highfield meadow.

"I'm outside your laws," she said. "You can't touch me. I believe there are countless women who would be as I am, if they dared. I believe there are countless women who would give all they know to be able to train their sons to their own ideals as I can train mine. We don't know anything about government or the forces that drive nations in peace and in war; but we do know that the real peace is not in possession, the real war is not in physical force and bloodshed to keep what you have got, or win a little more. One day there'll come a time when women won't give their sons for that, when they'll train themselves and train them to higher conceptions than you men have had."

Of a sudden she turned from the reason in her mind to the emotion in her breast.

"You shan't have my John!" she cried. "You shan't have him! I made him, as every woman could make her child if once she thought it was worth while. Well — I've thought it worth while, as now I think it worth while to fight for him and keep him. When you made your laws about illegitimacy and gave the woman the right in her child, it was because you considered that some men were fools and all women were cowards and that the one must be punished for his folly no less than the other for her fear. But what

THE GREEN BOUGH

would you do if in the end that law turned round against you? What would you do if all women chose to do as I have done and refused to bind themselves in matrimony to the man who gave them a child? Men would still be fools, you may be sure of that. Nature relies upon their folly, while they have thought that what she relied upon was their power. Power it may be with the few, the few that can inspire real love; but folly it is with the most of men; folly and greed which causes them to make so many women scoff at and hate the thought of love. Yes — hate the thought of love, some women do. Every young girl shrinks at the thought of physical contact. Many a young woman goes to her marriage with terror in her heart and with many that terror becomes horror when she knows. Even we become the possession you take to yourselves. What most of you call love — is that. But I'm going to teach my John better things. When he comes to love, he shall come awed, as a woman comes, not tramping with the pride of victory and possession. When he comes to love, it shall be to make her find it as wonderful as now she falsely dreams it is. You can't prevent me. I don't belong to you."

Still it was a force that spoke in her, a force before which, with character alone, he felt he had no power to oppose. She was not even speaking as one amongst the countless women she had called upon, but as woman, setting herself up in conflict against man. This was real war. He had sensed well enough what she meant by that. Yet in the habit of his mind, with

THE GREEN BOUGH

power or no power to oppose, he took such weapons as he could lay his hands upon and struck back at her.

"Don't let's stand here, like this," said he. "Can't we sit down on the grass and talk it out?"

She sat down and, as her body touched the ground, discovered that she was trembling in every limb.

"You're an extraordinary woman, Mary," he began. "The most extraordinary woman I've ever known. You talk with your heart and yet you make me feel all the time as though your heart were unapproachable. I've never touched it. I know that. I never touched it even those two nights in Bridnorth. I thought I had, but your letter afterwards soon proved to me I hadn't. Some man could, I suppose, but as you talk, I can't conceive the type he'd be. You know you frighten me and you'd terrify most men. I don't say it in any uncomplimentary fashion, but most men, hearing what you've said just now, would go to the ends of the earth rather than make love to or marry you."

"You needn't talk about lack of compliment," she said with a wry smile. "I'm quite aware of it. Women like me don't attract men. They say we're not natural. They like natural women and by that they mean they like women who are submissive. But if they think that's the natural woman, their conception of women has stopped with the animals. We aren't passive. We're coming to know that we're a force. Look at the way this talk of the enfranchisement of women is growing. Who'd have listened to it twenty years ago? I don't profess to know what it means.

THE GREEN BOUGH

I don't profess to conjecture what it's coming to. But it's growing; you can't deny it."

She must have thought she had won her way. Passing like this to abstract and speculative things, she must have believed he had no more to say; that question no longer existed about her keeping John. It only proved the want of knowledge of facts she admitted and it was inevitable she must have. She had spent all the force of the vital energy of her defense, but she had not subdued the man in him. Right as he knew in his heart she was, there was yet all the reserve of reason in his mind. The generations of years of precedent were all behind him. She had not subdued him merely by victory over his emotions. The force she had was young and ill-tried. She had set it up against convention and triumphed for all these years. She did not realize now what weight of pressing power there was behind it, the overbearing numbers that must tell in the end.

He was only waiting for this moment; this moment when in the flush of seeming victory she was weakest of all; this moment when in confidence her mind relaxed from its purpose and, as was always happening with his sex and hers, he could take her unawares. None of this conscious intent there was in him. He was merely articulating in his mind in obedience to the common instinct which through all the years of habit and custom and use have become the nature of man.

"Yes, that idea about the enfranchisement of women is growing," he admitted generously, "but I quite

THE GREEN BOUGH

agree we can none of us know what it'll come to. It can't alter one thing, Mary."

In a moment alert with the unyielding note in his voice, she inquired what that might be.

"It can't alter the fact that each one of us, child, of whatever enfranchisement we may be, stands utterly and completely alone, encouraged or hampered in our fulfillment by the circumstances of birth that are made for us. It happens that men are more equipped for the making of those circumstances than women are. It happens that men are more capable of wrestling with and overcoming the difficulties of environment, well, in other words, of providing the encouragement of circumstance. I don't think you can get away from that. I don't think you can get away from the fact that in this short life we don't want to waste our youth in making a suitable environment whenever it's possible to start so much ahead and conserve our energies for the best that's in us."

He turned quickly as he sat and looked at her.

"What have you called him?" he asked.

"John," she replied. "He's John Throgmorton."

"Well, do you think you're giving him the best chance of trying his soul with the biggest things? Whatever ideals you have for him, he stands alone with the circumstances of life in which you place him. Do you think he's going to do the best with them here? Do you believe when he grows up, he'll live to bless you for the chances of life you threw away for him to-day? Do you think, if he has ambition, he'll be thankful that

THE GREEN BOUGH

he started life as a farmer's boy with scarcely any education and but small prospects, when he could have been a master of men with a big estate and no need to consider the hampering necessity of making ends meet? Do you think if he's ambitious, he'll be thankful to you for that? Ask any one who has the widest and most generous experience of the world what they imagine will be his state of mind when, with ambition awakening, he comes to learn that he started with that handicap. Your ideals and ideas may be perfect in theory. How do you think they'll come out in practice? Ideas are nothing unless they can stand against the melting flames of fact. The experience of every one would go to tell you that in a practical world, which this is, you were wrong. Can you prove you will be right? Can you prove that when John grows up and ambition lights in him, he'll thank you for your choice to-day?"

She sat in silence, listening to every word; every word that beat with the mechanical insistence of a hammer stroke against her brain. They were all arguments she would have expected any one to use in such a case. They were all the very forces against which she had fought for so long. Yet hearing them now with this added element of emotion concerning John, which drove them not only into her brain, but beating up against her heart as well, she realized how unanswerable they sounded in — he had said it — in a practical world.

Supposing John did come to reproach her when he learnt the opportunity of life she had refused for him?

THE GREEN BOUGH

Her heart shrank and sickened from the thought of it. If it were for herself alone, how easy it would be to refuse; how easy to stand by the principles and ideals she knew in her soul were true.

But why should he ever know? Who would there ever be here in Yarningdale to tell him? For one instant that thought consoled and the next assailed her with venomous accusations. Was it not the self-confession of weakness to hope for concealment and deception to save her from retribution? The very realization of it shook her faith. To be true, to be worthy, to endure, ideals must be able to face the fiercest light; must live, be tried, be nailed to the cross if necessary. Only through such a test could they outlive the mockery of those who railed at and spat on them. She knew she could face the contempt of the whole world. In her own world had she not faced it already? But could she endure the recriminations of him whose whole life was so inextricably woven with her own?

"Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favor with God."

Those words came to her, a beacon across the heads of all the years; but it seemed very far away to her then. The light of it flickered an instant bringing courage to her heart and then died out again.

She did fear now. More than anything she had feared in her life, did she shrink from the reproach of John when he should come to years of appreciation. Her heart was here involved. Too shrewdly had Liddiard struck home at her weakest point.

THE GREEN BOUGH

"Do you think he'll live to bless you for the chances in life you threw away for him to-day?"

But why should it be to-day? Why in a sudden moment should this situation be thrust upon her? Why should she be harassed like this to say what she would do?

"You can't expect me to give you a decision about this all at once," she said, and there were rough edges to her voice. These were not the smooth words of an easy mind.

He heard each note. He knew she was swaying from her purpose. He realized the approach of what he had come there determined to secure.

"I don't wish you to give a decision to-day," he replied. "Of course I couldn't expect you to. Do you think I don't realize what I'm asking you—however much it may be for his sake."

"No—but I don't mean to-day or this year or the next," she went on in her distress. "Can't you wait until it can be put to him, until he's old enough to judge for himself; until he's learnt something of all I want to teach him?"

Liddiard put out his hand. She did not see it.

"My dear Mary," he said, as he withdrew it again, "wonderful as your ideals are, you have the fault of all idealists. You don't equip them to meet the facts of life. They're like flowers planted on a highway. You don't reckon on the traffic of the world that will break them down. Whatever your dreams may be, they cannot stop that traffic. The carts must go by.

THE GREEN BOUGH

You can't prevent a man from setting out on his journeys. You can only hinder him from reaching his destination by the beast you give him to draw the vehicle of his ambitions, by the sound of the ramshackle vehicle itself which you provide him with to reach his journey's end. John couldn't come to Wenlock Hall with the education of a farmer's boy. That would be too cruel. That would hamper him at every turn. The springs of his cart would be creaking. It would be like asking him to drive down Rotten Row in a muck cart. Do you think he'd find that fair? He must go to school. He must go to the University. He must learn the things that it is necessary he should know to fill a position like that. You can't send him. It must be me. I don't want your decision at once. I can wait a week, a month, more. But you must see yourself it can't be years. It can't be till he's able to choose for himself. That is the unpractical side of your ideals. You don't realize it would be too late then."

Mary sat with her elbows resting on her knees, her face locked and hidden in her hands. It was an abyss which, round that unexpected corner, she had seen yawning at her feet. It was deep. It was dark. Nothing so dark or deep or fathomless had presented itself to her in her life before. She felt herself falling, falling, falling into the bottomless pit of it and not one hand was there in all the world that stretched itself out to save her.

She had come so far, knowing at every turn that,

THE GREEN BOUGH

for all the rough and broken surfaces, her road was right; thinking, however hard or merciless to her feet, it yet would lead to sweet and quiet places. Courage she had had and fear she had known along the whole way. Still she had striven on as one, bearing a heavy burden, who knows there is release and rest at her journey's end.

But before the chasm of this abyss that fronted her, it was not so much courage she lost as the vital essence of volition. For herself she did not feel afraid. Whatever destruction might be awaiting her in those depths, she did not shrink from it. Eagerly, willingly, she would have sacrificed herself, but had no strength to take the hazard of what might chance and sacrifice him.

There was little need for Liddiard to tell her how every precedent in life opposed the thing she had set herself to do. And once John had come in contact with life itself, how could she be sure the pressure of his thoughts would not be tintured with regret. What more bitter inheritance, what more accusing testimony of her failure than that?

Not always a faun could she keep him. Not always with a dryad could he play in happy meadows. The world it seemed had grown too old, too worn, for that. Something must happen to stir human nature to its depths and rearrange the threadbare and accepted values before it could ever be young again.

Here she knew she was but dreaming dreams. There lay the abyss before her. Nothing in the wildest

THE GREEN BOUGH

flights of her imagination she could conceive was able to fill its depths or make a bridge, however treacherous, to span it.

He had said it. These things were unanswerable in a practical world; and in a practical world there was no true sense of vision. The possessions of men had become their limitations. Beyond them and the ease they brought to the few years that were theirs, they could not see.

The vision she had had was but a glimpse; a world beyond, not a world about her. As Liddiard watched her, she sank her head upon her knees. He thought she had turned to tears. But a heart, breaking, turns to that water that does not flow out of the eyes.

He thought she had turned to weeping and in genuine sympathy laid his hand gently on her arm. And this was the spear thrust that set free the water from the gash his touching hand made in her side.

She drew away and lifted her head and looked at him.

"You're strangling all the joy in the world," she said.

III

THERE came the sound of a voice through the willow trees, across the other side of the stream. It was a sturdy voice, high and ringing with encouragement.

"Bear up — be brave," it said. "We're coming to the ford. Once the river's crossed there are only a few more miles to go before we're safe."

The smile that rose into Mary's eyes found no place to linger there. She turned with Liddiard at the sound to see, a faun no longer, a faun transformed to stalwart man, bearing a distressed maiden in his arms — a knight errant shouldering the precious burden of outraged womanhood and bringing her to safety.

Again the smile crept back into Mary's eyes. Again it crept away.

"Has Lucy hurt herself?" she asked. "What's the matter with her?"

"There were two terrible robbers in the wood," said he as he strode with his burden into the stream. "They had tied her to a tree. She was all naked when I found her. I've killed them both — she's —" Then seeing Liddiard for the first time, he stopped. Astonishment leapt into his eyes. He set his Lucy down and stood staring.

"John," said Mary, "this is a friend of mine, a Mr.

THE GREEN BOUGH

Liddiard." She turned to Liddiard. "This is my John," she said.

They met and solemnly shook hands. With eyes that sought for subtlest meanings and hidden things, Mary watched them, the touching of their hands, the look of the eyes. So surely she knew, across the unmeasured distance between them, Liddiard was casting the javelin of his soul to pierce John's heart. In that silence as he stood holding John's hand, she knew he was eagerly, determinedly, poignantly conscious of being father of her child and in that silence was straining to project his consciousness into the very soul of John.

Would he respond? She watched them both, but closest by far, her John. Was there some voice in life between father and child which all the years and all their silence could not still? With almost a jealous dread she stood before that moment swift in her mind to see the faintest sign. Would he respond?

For a while John's hand lay in Liddiard's, then of himself he took it away.

"Can we go on playing, Mummy?" he asked. When she knew there had been no answer to Liddiard's call; when, sure in her heart he knew none but her, she knelt down on the grass at his side and took his cool cheeks in her hands.

"If you'll kiss me," said she, "if you'll kiss me first."

He framed his lips and kissed her eyes and stood back laughing. He framed his lips again and kissed her mouth, then laughed again and lastly, flinging his

THE GREEN BOUGH

arms about her neck, he poured his kisses like a song into her ears, then, shouting to his Lucy, ran away.

In a long silence, Liddiard turned and watched them, faun and dryad once more, spirits of that sunshine and those deep green shades of the trees. He looked back at Mary.

"You've made a sturdy, splendid thing of him, Mary," he said emotionally. "You've made him fit for the very best."

She closed her eyes.

"Who's the little girl?" he asked presently.

"Lucy — Lucy Kemp. She's the daughter of a farmer who lives over there. They're great friends." She half smiled. "I was jealous at first. I know now these things must be. Boy and girl, why shouldn't they begin that way? It's grown to be the sweetest of wooings to me. They're becoming like two young shoots together. One day their roots will twine."

He put on his hat.

"You can't be sure of that," said he. "One day perhaps he'll need his own. I know you think, living here, that class means nothing. You rule out heredity altogether. But it comes out. He might be content. Do you think a girl like that could ever make him realize the fullness of life?"

Fear sprang back into her heart again.

"Oh, why did you ever come?" she said. "We were all so happy here!"

IV

MARY stayed on at Yarningdale when John was taken away to school. Had she had fear of the pain it was, she would still have remained. Mr. and Mrs. Peverell were getting old and so close by this was her life now knit with theirs, she knew her absence would have made too deep a void were she to leave them then.

The natural milkmaid she had become, so skillful, so acknowledgeable and conscientious in her work, that Mr. Peverell had increased his activities in this direction. Where at first there had been but nine milking cows, there now were fourteen. All through the summer months, he supplied thirty gallons of milk a day. Filled in the churns, Mary drove with it every evening in the spring cart to the station. At her suggestion and by means of her labor he undertook the rearing of his own calves and the ultimate introduction of them into the milking herd. Whenever good fortune brought them a promising heifer calf, it was given into Mary's charge. It became an interest deeper and more exacting than she knew to wean and rear it for the herd. So they were able to know the character and history of each beast as it came into service, its milking qualities, its temper, the stock from which it sprang.

THE GREEN BOUGH

As thus, having weaned him towards the vision of life she had, Mary would have reared her John.

"Why — why did 'ee let 'en go, Maidy?" Mrs. Peverell had cried to her the night after John's departure when she lay stretched upon her bed, staring, staring, staring at the paper on the wall.

"I'd taught him to give," she muttered. "How would he believe what I'd said one day, when he learnt that I'd kept back? How can you teach another how to live if you don't know how, yourself? There's only one way of knowing the truth about life — living it. I shan't lose him. I know deep and deep and deep in my heart, I shan't. He's gone, but he'll come back. Should I really have believed if I hadn't let him go? The belief that's really in the spirit comes out in the flesh. It must! It must! Or soul and body are never one."

It was to herself she had spoken. Never her hopes, ambitions or faith for John had she attempted to explain to Mrs. Peverell. None but the simplest issues of life could that good woman appreciate. Right or wrong things were with her. No other texture but this they had. In fullest conviction she knew that Mary had been right in everything she had done. So close in sympathy with their Maidy was she now that even in this parting with John, that well-nigh broke her heart, she felt Mary must be right.

"Shall I cross his name out of the book, Maidy?" she had asked as she was leaving the room. "'Twon't

THE GREEN BOUGH

be nothing to him, this place, when he comes into his big estate."

Sitting up in the bed, Mary had called Mrs. Peverell to her, clutching her hands.

"Never do that!" she cried. "That was his birth-right. He was born here. I made him here. Promise me, don't do that. If you did that, I should feel I'd lost him forever!"

For the first half of every holiday at school John came back to his mother at Yarningdale. The remainder of his time he spent in Somerset. How closely she watched him it is not difficult to suppose. Every term that passed brought him to her again with something she had taught him gone, with something they had taught him in its place.

To the outward observer, he was the same John. All his love he gave her, teasing her with it as he grew older, playing the lover to her shyness when she found him turning from boy to man.

They spoke little of Liddiard or the life in Somerset for the first year. All invitations to Wenlock Hall though freely offered, she refused.

"I appreciate your wife's generosity of wish to meet me; don't think me seeking to make difficulties; really I am trying to avoid them," she wrote.

In fact it was that Yarningdale was her home and still, pursuant of her purpose, she would not allow John to associate her in his mind with any other place.

THE GREEN BOUGH

Within a year they had made him feel the substance of his inheritance. He spoke of Wenlock Hall, knowing it would be his. Inevitably he made comparisons between their lives and hers, but it was not until after his first term at Oxford that openly he questioned her wisdom in staying on the farm.

"They both want you down there, Mater, at Wenlock Hall. And after all, this is a poky little place, isn't it? Of course the farm's not bad, but it's a bit ramshackle and sometimes I hate to think of you still milking the cows in those dingy old stalls. We've got lovely sheds at Wenlock Hall, asphalt floor, beautifully drained, plenty of light and as clean as a new pin."

She looked at him steadily.

"For nearly eighteen years, John, I've been milking the cows in those stalls. Until two weeks before you were born, I sat there milking them. As soon as I was well again I went back. You've got your little private chapel at Wenlock Hall. Those stalls are my chapel. That little window hung with cobwebs through which I've seen the sunset — oh, so many times, I don't want any more wonderful an altar than that. In those stalls I've had thoughts no light through stained glass windows could ever have brought to me. Do you remember sitting beside me there while I milked, oh, heaps of times, but one time particularly when you asked me about God?"

He thought an instant and then burst into shouts of laughter.

THE GREEN BOUGH

"What, that time I asked you if God had a beard like old Peverell?"

She tried to laugh with him, just as, at the time, she had tried to control her laughter. This was the difference between John, then and now; was it not indeed the difference in all of her life?

"That was the end," said she, "that was the last question you asked. We had said a lot before that. Don't you remember?"

"I was just a kid then," said he. "I suppose I was always asking questions."

"Don't you now?"

"No, not so much, why should I? Mater, you don't expect me always to be a silly little fool, do you?"

The breath was deep she drew.

"You were far from being a silly little fool then, John. Those questions were all wonderful to me, even the last one."

He laid both his hands upon her shoulders and looked far into her eyes.

"You take life so seriously, Mater," he said.

"Only when it loses its seriousness, John," she replied. "I was full of the joy of it in those days when always you were flinging your earnest little questions at me. It's now when it seems to me sometimes you want to play with life that I take it seriously. It's now, when sometimes you give me the impression you just want to enjoy life, that all the joy goes out of it. I wonder would you understand, my dearest," she

THE GREEN BOUGH

slipped her arm about his neck, "if I told you you were more of a man to me than than often you are now."

"Well, dash it, Mater, I can't help it. We don't go mooching about the 'Varsity with long faces wondering about God. Every chap enjoys himself as much as he can and that all depends on the allowance he gets from his people. They're jolly decent to me that way. I've a good deal more than most fellows. Why, I have a corking time up there and why shouldn't I? I shall be young only once."

"You might always be young," she whispered. "They're teaching you that youth's a thing to spend, like money when you have it. I know it's all the training, my dear. I ought never to have let you go. I'd never have taught you that."

"I shouldn't have got much joy out of working on this bally old farm, should I?" he retaliated. "The Pater's busy enough down at Wenlock Hall, but he doesn't actually do manual work. He's always going round the place. I don't suppose it pays, real profits, I mean, like old Peverell makes this pay, but it gives plenty of employment."

"Pater? Is that what you call him now?"

After the sound of that word, she had heard no more. It rang with countless echoes in her brain. What a sound it might have had if ever she had loved. Was it as hollow to other women as it was to her now?

"He asked me to, this year," said John. "Just before I went up to the 'Varsity. I couldn't refuse,

THE GREEN BOUGH

could I? After all, he is my father. Lots of people say I'm awfully like him."

Mary turned away.

"I must go out and fetch the cows now," she said.

"Would you like to come?"

He showed an instant's pause. Before it had passed, swiftly that instant her pride arrested it.

"Perhaps you were going to do something else," said she.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I was going to take old Peverell's gun round by the wood. It's alive with rabbits. He says they're spoiling his mangolds."

"All right, my dear. I'll see you at supper-time."

She drove the cows into the shed. One by one they filed into their accustomed stalls. Mechanically she fastened the chains about their necks and took down her stool and brought her pail. Leaning her cheek as so many times she had done against the first warm flank, she looked up. The setting sun was shining through the window.

THIS and many other such conversations revealed in time to Mary that which she had both known and feared. John was changing. Every fresh occasion of their meeting he was altered a little more. The possessive passion, inherent in the very nature of his sex, was stirring in him. Gradually but inevitably they were wakening in him the pride of inheritance. Less and less did it seem to her he was creating his own.

It was all too subtle to arrest, too elusive to oppose. Still, as always, he had his charm. Both Peverell and his wife found him altered, it was true, but improved.

"There be gettin' the grand manner of the squire about 'en," Peverell said one day when he went back to Somerset before returning to Oxford. "How many acres is it coming to 'en? Two thousand! Well! A young man needs his head set right way on to let none o' that go wastin'."

Not even did Mary let Mrs. Peverell see the wound she had. Scarcely herself did she realize how deep it had gone. But more than in his manner and the things he said, it was in his attitude to Lucy she was made most conscious of his change.

During his first holidays, they had played together as though no difference had entered their lives to sep-

THE GREEN BOUGH

arate them. The next time they were more reserved. A shyness had come over them which partly Mary justified to herself, ascribing it to that awkwardness of the schoolboy who, if he is not playing some manly game or doing some manly thing, is ever ready to fear the accusation of ridiculousness.

But it was before he went to Oxford, while he was yet at school that the change in him became more than that merely of confusion. It was plain to be seen that he avoided her then. A solitary figure, wandering in the Highfield meadow where first they had met, where, most likely it was, they still would meet whenever he was at Yarningdale, showed to Mary the patient heart that watched and waited for him.

Sometimes at Mary's invitation she joined and walked with them. Often it was no more than a shouted greeting from John, flung into the wind over his shoulder, after which the little figure would disappear through the willow trees and for the rest of those holidays perhaps be seen no more, or ever be mentioned by John.

"Have you lost all interest in Lucy?" Mary asked him straightly once when, at the end of his time at Yarningdale, he was packing up his things for the rest of his holiday in Somerset.

He looked up, at first surprised and then with color rising in his cheeks.

"What do you mean by interest?" he asked. "I like her very much. If you mean I haven't seen her these holidays, I can't go hunting her out, can I?"

THE GREEN BOUGH

"Can't you? You used to once."

"Well, I was a kid then. So was she. She's nearly seventeen now."

"Doesn't it all come back to a matter of interest though? You can't be interested, of course, if you're not. I'm not suggesting that you're being willfully unkind to her. I don't think you'd be willfully unkind to any one; but do you know what will happen as soon as you've gone?"

"What?"

"She'll come round here on some pretext. She'll contrive to seek me out and gradually we shall begin to talk about you and then, most cunningly it will seem to herself she is doing it, she'll ask whether you said anything about her while you were here and if you did what it was and how you said it or what I think you meant by it."

John flung the things into his bag.

"I wish you wouldn't encourage her, Mater," he exclaimed.

She came across the room to him. She took his hands that clumsily were folding some garment before he could pack it. She forced him to turn his face to hers.

"It's just as much that she encourages me," she said. "Do you know I was jealous of her once?"

He guffawed with laughter and took her face in his hands and kissed her between the eyes.

"I was," she whispered, her voice made more than tender with that kiss. "When she first took your

THE GREEN BOUGH

thoughts a moment from me, that day you met her when we were making hay in the Highfield meadow, I was jealous then. Now we have one thing, so closely in common that, though she's only sixteen and I'm forty-seven we've become inseparable friends."

"What do you mean, one thing in common?"

"The old John."

For an instant she gave lease to her emotion and gently clung to him.

"That was the young John," she added in a whisper, "the little boy with the mop of hair who was a pirate captain and a Claude Duval and a hundred sturdy men all contained, John, in the simplest, sweetest mind that held one thought. It was to be a man like Mr. Peverell and till the soil with labor from sunrise to the sunset, a man like Mr. Peverell who owed no thanks to any, but out of his own heart and with his own energy made his pride, a man like Mr. Peverell who gave all that he had to the earth which gave all back again to him."

Her voice was almost trembling now. Chance of circumstance had placed this moment in her hands. She knew she was fighting for her ideals, perhaps with the last opportunity that would ever be given her.

Would he respond? Her heart fluttered in her breast with fear. Had this opportunity come too late? Was he past answering to it now? She hung upon the moment with catching breath, scarce daring to watch his eyes, lest she should know too soon.

Feeling his arm slip round her shoulder, finding his lips against her cheek, she could have cried aloud for

THE GREEN BOUGH

joy, yet all in strange perversity kept the stiller in his arms.

This was response. The touch of her mind had not yet gone from his. He had emotions yet that answered to her own. The possessive passion had not won him wholly for its own. A heart he had that still could beat with hers, that still could urge the love in him to take her in his arms.

She knew he was going to speak and waited, saying no more herself to prompt the answer he might give, but laying her cheek against his lips, hearing the breath he drew as he replied.

"I don't feel that I've changed, Mater," he murmured to her. "I'm a bit older, that's all. Being up at Oxford makes you see things differently, and it's awfully different at Wenlock Hall from what it is here. You get out of the way of doing things for yourself, there are so many people to do them for you. Why don't you come down there? It's awfully jolly. They'd give you an awfully good time. I know they would. Let me send a wire and say you're coming these holidays, with me, now? Do! Will you?"

She shook her head. He did not know what temptation he offered. But there, in Yarningdale was the citadel of her faith. Deeply as she longed always to be with him, she dared not sally forth on such adventure as that. Only her faith was there to be its garrison. Only by setting her standard there upon its walls did she feel she could defend the fortress of her ideals.

If she could but keep his love, as now in his arms

THE GREEN BOUGH

she felt she had it sure, then always there was hope she might draw him back to the life that she had planned for him. A brave hope it was while she rested there in his arms. For one moment it soared high indeed; the next it fluttered like a shot bird to the earth.

"Don't ask me about Lucy," he said as still he held her to him. "You can't expect me to feel the same about her, or that it should grow into anything more than it was. After all, she's only Kemp's daughter."

She looked away. Her hold of him loosened. Scarcely realizing it, she had slipped from his arms and was standing alone.

VI

IT was just before the summer vacation, when John was eighteen, that he had written to Mary, saying —

“I’ve got special leave to come down next Friday and I want to ask you something. There’s a girl I’ve got to know, well, she’s twenty-five and I want you to meet her first before they do at Wenlock Hall.”

She had come then and so soon. The first woman of John’s own choosing now he was become a man. The jealousy she had known concerning Lucy was as nothing to this she felt with a sickness of apprehension in her now. Fate, circumstance, the mere happenings of life, these had brought him his Lucy. But here was one his heart must have sought out, his soul had chosen. She seemed to know there was no chance, but something selective about this. Here the nature that was in him had been called upon. For the first time, with no uncertainty, she was to learn what that nature was.

Mrs. Peverell indeed had spoken true when she had called him a love-child. His response to passion had been swift and soon. And was he coming, awed to love as once she had said she would teach him to come? Or was he tramping with the pride of victory and possession? The moment she saw this girl, she would know. The world was full of women who

THE GREEN BOUGH

asked for no more; who judged the affections of their men by just that measure of animal passion which in their hearts and often upon their tongues they professed to despise.

Only the few there were who, never asking but waiting for the love that she had wished to teach him, inspired it. Had his heart sought out one of these? With fear and trembling she read on.

"I can't explain in writing," the letter continued, "but you must see her before any one else."

The degree of her gratitude for that for a moment drove away all fear, but not for long.

"I've told her everything about myself," she read on. "She's wonderful. She doesn't mind a bit. I want you to let me bring her down to Yarningdale. She can have my room and I'll doss out at the Inn. I know you'll like her. You must. She's splendid. I've warned her what the farm is like, that it's a bit rough, but she doesn't care and she's longing to meet you."

All Mary's intuitive impressions of her who did not mind when she had heard about her John, she put away from her and, harnessing the light horse in the spring cart, drove down that Friday to the station.

It was characteristic of John's letters that he had not mentioned her name. Many of his friends at the 'Varsity she knew well by his accounts of them, having no more classification for them in her mind than the nicknames they went by.

THE GREEN BOUGH

John was leaning out of the carriage window as the train drew in. Swift enough she noted the look of eager excitement in his eyes; but it was that figure in the pale blue frock behind him she saw. As they came down the platform towards her, John first with his bounding stride, still it was the figure behind him her heart was watching, notwithstanding that she gave her eyes to him.

"Here's Dorothy Fielding, Mater," he said, scarcely with pause to exchange their kiss of meeting.

She turned with the smile that hid her hurt to meet those eyes her John had chosen to look into.

It was a quiet woman this Dorothy saw, so calm and serene as made her realize how all those subtle preparations she had made for this meeting were wasted here. That she was well gowned, well shod, that her hair was neither too carefully dressed nor untidy in its effect, that her hat showed confidence in her taste, all these preparations over which she had taken such care she knew could not avail here in the judgment of those eyes that met hers.

This was not just a woman she had to please and satisfy; it was something like an element, like fire or like rushing water her soul must meet, all bare and stripped of the disguising superficialities of life.

"This is the first time I've heard your name," said Mary with that smile she gave her. "John never mentioned it in his letter. But then I don't suppose he's ever told you what I was like."

"Mater! I've told Dorothy everything, haven't I,

THE GREEN BOUGH

Dee? Described every little detail about you, rather!"

Mary's hands stretched out and held his. Her eyes she kept for Dorothy.

"Well, I hope you're not disappointed," she said, "because I'm not a bit like it — am I?"

She knew so soon, at once. So far beyond the reach of conscious comprehension had been Dorothy's surprise that now it came rushing to the surface of her mind with Mary's detection of it.

"On the contrary," she replied, "I think I'd have known you anywhere."

Then from that moment they knew they shared no thought in common. That first lie was the sound of their challenge. Each for their separate purposes they were at enmity in their claim of John. He stood beside them, there upon the platform, supremely unconscious of the forces he had set free, sublimely happy in his achievement of bringing them together.

There were two women, dearer to him at that moment than any two other people in the world and all he saw was the smiles they gave each other. The spiritual and the material need of him they had, for which already they had cried the challenge to battle, this came no more even to the threshold of his mind than came to his ears, intent on all they said, the short, sharp whistle of the departing train.

Each in that first moment had set up her standard. His soul was the sepulchre for which Mary fought. There between those two, lay John's ideals and visions of life. It was they who had the power to make them

THE GREEN BOUGH

what they should be. Through them he was to find stimulus for the emotions that should govern all he did. Still was he for molding, still the plastic spirit needing the highest emotion of the highest ideal to give it noblest purpose.

And here, as ever, his mother was she who in that malleable phase set first the welfare of his soul. No conception or consideration of inheritance was there to hinder her. It was not to a man fit for the world she saw him grow, but to equip him for life she gave the essence of her being.

This from the very first, before ever that cry of his lifted above the wind in the elm trees, had been her sure and certain purpose. No possessions in life there were but him to limit the perspective of her vision; and such a possession was he as for whom, if need be, she could make absolute sacrifice.

Already she had done so. Already once she had given her heart for breaking to let him go. Fear there was in her now she had not had courage enough in her purpose. Fear there was she had not trusted enough to faith.

Would he have lived to rebuke her for the opportunity she had thrown away? Might he not have lived, as she would have taught him, to thank her for the sense of life she had given him in exchange for the world that now was at his feet?

Once she had given her heart for breaking and it had healed in the patient endurance of her soul. She had no thought to give it here. Here in that moment as

THE GREEN BOUGH

they met upon the platform, she knew she must fight to the last. Men might make the world, but it was women who created life. Between those two women, laughing like a schoolboy, he stood for his life to be shaped and fashioned and all that appeared upon the surface of things to him was that the world was a happy place.

VII

IT would be a false conception of Mary Throgmorton in this phase of her being to picture her as consenting to the common wiles of women.

She fought her battle for her John with weapons the stress of circumstances made ready for her hand. All men have done the same. Guile there may seem to have been in her, but none greater than that which in some one form or another is called forth from all human nature in any conflict. The smiles with which Dorothy greeted her had to be met with smiles; the delicate word she so despised demanded no other than the delicate word from her. To have used blunter, heavier weapons than these might indeed have routed her opponent, yet to have won in such a case would have been worse than loss.

Here was war in the true sense as she knew it; not the flinging of a greater force against a lesser, winning on the field of battle and in the very boastful pride of victory, losing in the field of life. It was not to confound her enemy she sought but to win that issue upon which the full justice of her hope was set. Not for herself to gain or keep it had she made her heart of tempered steel, but for another to find the liberty his soul had need of.

It was for John she fought and none of his pity

THE GREEN BOUGH

dared she awaken for his Dorothy, well knowing that though by Nature victors themselves, there was little love in the hearts of men for a triumphant woman.

If this was guile, it was such as life demanded of her then. With all nobility of character to criticize herself, she did not pause here for sentiment. If the weapons she must use were not to her liking, necessity yet fitted them readily to her hold.

Never had John seen his mother so gentle or so kind. For the first time in his conscious mind he appreciated the pain of jealousy he knew must be pricking at her heart. For in some sense it was her defeat it seemed to him he witnessed; a brave defeat with head high in pride and eyes that sadness touched but left no tears. He came to realize the ache of loneliness she felt whenever in the fields, about the farm or through the woods he went with Dorothy alone. After a few days, it was he, unprompted, who asked her to accompany them, and Mary whose wisdom it was so readily to find some duty about the house or with the cows that prevented her acceptance.

Gradually she permitted him to come upon suspicion that these excuses were often invented. Gradually she brought him to consciousness of the sacrifice she made. He found he learnt it with effort or intent and appreciated in himself the breadth of vision his heart had come by.

"Did you realize," he said one day to Dorothy in the woods, "that the Mater just invented that excuse not to come with us?"

THE GREEN BOUGH

She shook her head.

He found amaze at that.

"She did," said he. "Those cow stalls don't want whitewashing again. They're a bit ramshackle compared with ours at Wenlock Hall, but they're as clean as a new pin. Old Peverell told me the inspector said they'd never been so clean before. She invented it."

Suddenly he took Dorothy's arm.

"Do you know you've done that for me?" he whispered.

"Done what?"

"Given me a wider view of things, taught me to realize other people's feelings as well as my own, shown me what she suffers when she sees me go off to Wenlock, what she suffers when I bring you down here and go out with you every day, leaving her alone."

"But why should she suffer?" asked Dorothy. "She's your mother, she must love you. She must want to see you happy. She must be glad you're going to come into that beautiful place in Somersetshire."

He fell to silence, having no answer to that, yet feeling she somehow had not understood what he had meant.

That night he came to Mary's room to say good-night before he went down to the bedroom he had taken at the Crooked Billet. Always hitherto it had been a knock upon the door, a call of good-night and then her listening to the sound of his footsteps down the thinly carpeted stairs. This time he asked if he might come in.

THE GREEN BOUGH

By the light of her candle, Mary was lying in her bed reading one of the books from a little shelf at her bedside. More than she knew, this request of his startled yet spurred her no less to the swift expediency of what she must do.

"Just one moment," she called back, steadying the note in her voice. Quickly then she slipped from her bed, arranging her hair as best she could before the mirror; with a fever almost of speed, changing her night attire for a garment the best she had, fresh with the scent of the lavender she kept with all her things. Not once did her fingers fumble in their haste. Another moment she was back in bed again, her book put back upon the shelf and another, one of those Nature books she used to read when he was a little boy, taken in its place.

"Come in," she said and, because her voice was so low with her control of eagerness, she had to repeat her summons.

It was as the door opened and he entered that she felt like a mistress receiving her lover. Her heart was beating in her throat. Even John found her eyes more bright than he had ever seen them before.

All love of women in that moment she knew was the same. For sons or lovers, if it were their hearts beat too high for the material judgments in a material world, what did that matter if so high they beat as to lift the hearts of men to nobler than material things? This, she realized it, was her function; this the power so many women were denied, having no vision of it in

THE GREEN BOUGH

themselves because men did not grant it license in their needs.

Not to give him possession as a lover did she admit him then, but in the sacrifice of her love and of herself to lift him through emotion to the most spiritual conceptions of life that were eternal.

Never in all that relationship between herself and John had she felt the moment so surely placed within her hands as then.

"What is it?" she asked, so gently in her voice that she could have laughed aloud at her own self-possession.

"Just came in to say good-night," said he with an attempt at ease, and came across to the bed and leant over it to kiss her cheek, uplifted to meet his, and found that clean scent of lavender in his nostrils when, before he had really learnt his purpose, he sat down upon the bed at her side and remained there, gazing into her eyes.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

She turned the book round for him to see, making no comment; allowing the memories of childhood to waken in him of their own volition.

He shut the book up, contriving to let his hand find hers as she contrived to let it stay there without seeming of intent.

"What is it, John?" she whispered again.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing except just what I said. I wanted to say good-night." Yet he still lingered; still, without keeping it, his hand remained in hers.

THE GREEN BOUGH

For some while he stayed there, sitting on her bed, saying nothing, playing only with his fingers that held her hand. With a supreme patience she waited in silence, knowing no words were needed there, her heart throbbing with an expectant pulse that rose to riot as suddenly he slipped on to his knees on the floor and leant his head against her breast.

"I want her, Mater," he whispered. "Haven't you guessed that? I'm terribly in love."

Had she guessed that? Indeed! But had she ever dreamt or hoped for this, that his first love-making would be through her? This was the first love scene, the first passion in the drama of his life and in awe of what it was, he had chosen her to play it with.

Emotions such as were triumphant in Mary Throgmorton then cannot easily be captured. Here in certain fact was the first hour of love her heart had surely known; an hour, albeit not her own, which for the rest of her life was to remain with its burning embers in her memory.

With deep breaths she lay for a moment still, holding him in her arms.

"Haven't you told her, John?" she asked presently.

He shook his head against her breast.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I can't just tell her I love her. It's more than that. She wouldn't understand. If she did, she might hate me for it."

It might have been youth and the utter lack of his experience. He was only just eighteen. But Mary

THE GREEN BOUGH

found in it more than that. In the first great emotion in his life, when he was stirred so deep as to touch those very first impressions she had given him in his childhood, he was setting on one side himself and the demands that Nature made on him.

How little his Dorothy would appreciate that, Mary had made certain estimate the first moment they had met. No awe of love was there in her; no vision his need of her could ever destroy. She, with the many others, was amongst those women who, bowing herself to the possessive passions of men, would sell her soul in slavery to share them if she could.

Whatever of her training it was they had bereft him of at Wenlock, however out of the true line they had bent that green bough her hands had fashioned, still in the vital elements of his being, he sought the clear light above the forest trees about him. In this swift rush of love, a storm that beat and shook him with the force of it, some spiritual impulse still remained. He felt his Dorothy was some sacred thing, too sweet to touch with hands all fierce as his.

How long would that remain with him? In the materialism of his new environment would they let him keep it for long? Another day and drawn by the shrilling call of Nature into the arms of Dorothy, might he not lose it even so soon as that?

He did not know how true he spoke when he had said she would not understand. A product of the laws of man she was, eager and passionate to submit, needing that trampling spirit of possession to give her sense

THE GREEN BOUGH

of life, caring little how soon love trod itself into the habit of familiar touch.

No emotion of ideals would she have with which to set her children forth upon their journeys. Into an old and tired world they would be ushered with grudging of the pain they brought and fretting complaint of ugly circumstance. Consequences of passion they would be, no more, with nothing but the magic of youth to give them laughter in their playgrounds.

So well did Mary know that night as he lay there against her breast, John would not keep his spirit long untouched when other arms than hers had held him. Too soon had they taken her from him. Too soon, in that moment's want of faith, had she let him go. Possession of the earth already had brought him scorn of it. Again and again had she seen that in the change of his mind towards their simple life at Yarningdale.

The earth she would have had him labor in, was such as now would soil his hands. It was enjoyment he sought, she knew it well, not life. With that poison of inheritance they had instilled into his blood, fast he was becoming an echo, not a voice. The message of all ideals was being stilled to silence in him. They were teaching him to say what the Liddiards had said one generation upon another — gain and keep, gain and keep — it would be folly to give away.

Only in this, this love that stirred him to the very essence of his being, was he recalling the years of emotion she had given to the fashioning of his soul. Here for that moment as he lay in her arms, he was the man

THE GREEN BOUGH

her heart had meant to make him, awed by love, made timorous almost by the power of his passion.

But how long would it survive its contact with that casual materialism his Dorothy would blend it with? How soon before she made his love that habit of the sexes which bore no more than drifting consequences upon its stream?

Neither long would it be, nor had she power now to intervene. Claspings her arm more tightly round him, already she felt him slipping from her, the more because in that brief moment he was so much her own.

"My dearest, need you tell her yet?" she asked. "I know you feel a man, but you're still so young. You're only eighteen, you couldn't marry yet. Liddiard wouldn't want you to marry. Need you tell her yet?"

"I must," he muttered. "Not for a little while yet perhaps. I've told you. That was a help. I don't feel so much of a brute as I did. But sooner or later I shall have to. I can't help being young and I'm not inventing what I feel. Other chaps feel it too, quite decent fellows, but somehow or other I can't do what they do."

"What do they do?"

Frankly she would have admitted that was curiosity, but curious only was she to know what he did not do rather than what they did.

"What do they do, John?" she repeated as he lay there, silent.

"Oh, they go up to London when they get the chance. There are women, you wouldn't understand that, Mater.

THE GREEN BOUGH

Probably you've never known there were women like that. How could you have known down here? My God! Fancy one of those women in the fields! She'd drop down in the grass and she'd hide her face. Anyhow in streets they keep their heads up. They look at you in the streets."

"And you couldn't do that, John?"

"No — I tried. I went up to London once. We went to a night-club. All sorts of them were dancing there. I just couldn't, that's all. The fellow I was with, he went away with one of them. I envied him and I hated him. I don't know what I felt. I couldn't. It didn't make me feel sick of it all. I don't think I felt afraid. You kept on coming into my mind, but just you wouldn't have stopped me if I'd really wanted to. I did want to. I had wanted to. That's what we meant to do. But when I got there to that place, and one of those women kissed me, I felt there was something else I wanted more. I think I nearly went mad that night. I had a little bed in a stuffy little room in a poky little hotel. I couldn't sleep. I never slept a wink. I nearly went mad calling myself a fool for not doing what I'd wanted to do. There I'd have done it. Then I didn't care what I did. But it was too late then. I'd lost my chance. I was sorry I'd lost it."

He raised his head and looked at her.

"I'm not sorry now, Mater. I wasn't sorry for long. Aren't men beasts?"

"My dear — my dear," she whispered. "If they

THE GREEN BOUGH

were all like you, what a world love could make for us to live in. Oh, keep it all, my dear. Never be sorry. It isn't the right or the wrong of it, John. It's the pity of it. If women had men like you to love them, think what their children would be! Don't tell her yet, John. Wait a little longer if you can."

"I can't!" he moaned. "I can't wait. She knows I care for her. I'm sure she does. I must tell her everything."

If only it had been Lucy he had shrunk from telling, then fear would have met with fear and mingled into love. It was not fear he would meet with in Dorothy. Too wise perhaps she might be to laugh at his timorousness, but swift enough would she turn it to the passion to possess.

That night as John lay in Mary's arms, there reposed with simple state in the Government House at Sarajevo, the two dead bodies of a man and a woman who had found rest in the shadow of the greatest turmoil the world had ever known, which through the minds of millions in central Europe were ringing the words —

"The great questions are to be settled — not by speeches and majority resolutions, but by blood and iron."

VIII

JOHN waited a little as he had said he would. Two days later, keeping his silence, he returned to Oxford. In her first encounter with Mary, Dorothy knew that she had lost. She was no equal, she realized it, to that serene and quiet woman who gave her smile for smile and in whose eyes the smile still lingered when in her own it had faded away.

It was not before the latter end of July that the first whisper of war came to Yarningdale. Conflagrations might burst forth in Europe; the world might be set alight. It mattered little to them at Yarningdale farm. Whatever might happen, the cows had still to be milked, the crops to be gathered, the stacks to be built. How did it effect them what an Emperor might say, or a little gathering of men elect to do? They could not stop the wheat from ripening. They could not stop the earth from giving back a thousandfold that which man had given to the earth.

"War!" exclaimed Mr. Peverell. "Men beant such fools as that! 'Tis all a lot of talk to make the likes of us think mighty fine of them that says they stopped it. We'm have taxes to pay and if those what are in the Government doant make a noise about something, we might begin awonderin' what they did to earn 'em."

THE GREEN BOUGH

It was all very well to talk like that and likely enough it sounded in their parlor kitchen at Yarningdale. But there were other thoughts than these in Mary's mind and not all the confident beliefs of peace amongst those who had nothing to gain and all to lose, could shake her from them.

When once it had become a daily topic of speculation and newspapers in Yarningdale were being read every morning, she formed her own opinions as to what would happen out of the subconscious impulses of her mind.

Deep in her heart, she knew there would be war, a mighty war, a devastating war. Something the spirit of her being had sense of revealed to her that this was the inevitable fruit of that tree of civilization men had trained to the hour of bearing. This was its season. War was its yield. With blood and iron the crop of men's lives must be gathered. Inevitably must the possessive passion turn upon itself and rend the very structure it had made. The homes that had been built with greed, by greed must be destroyed. This, as they had made it, was the everlasting cycle Nature demanded of life. Energy must be consumed to give out energy. To inherit and possess was not enough. It was no more than weeds accumulating and clogging in the mill-wheel. If man had no ambition other than to possess; if in his spirit it was not the emotion of the earth to give, then the great plow of war must drive its furrow through the lives of all of them.

In some untraceable fashion, Mary felt that the

THE GREEN BOUGH

whole of her life had been building up to this. Somehow it seemed the consummation of all she had tried and failed to do. At the supreme moment of her life, she had been lacking in faith of her ideals. She had lost the clear sight of her vision. The whole world had done that and now it was faced with the stern justice of retribution.

There must be war. She knew there must. Men and women, all of them had failed. What could there be but the devastating horror of war to cleanse the evil and rid of the folly of weeds the idle fallows of their lives?

"Well, if it is to be war," said the Vicar one day, having tea with Mary and Mrs. Peverell in the parlor kitchen, "Germany's not the nation of shrewd men we've thought her. If she insists upon it," he added, his spirit rising from meekness with a glitter in his eye, "she'll have forgotten we're the richest nation in the world. On the British possessions the sun never sets. She'll have forgotten to take that into account."

Every man was talking in this fashion. She read the papers. It was there as well. Long articles appeared describing the wealth of the German colonies and what their acquisition would mean to England if she were victorious on the sea. Extracts were printed from the German papers exposing her lust and greed because, with envious eyes upon the British Colonies she was already counting the spoils of victory.

There in the quiet and the seclusion at Yarningdale, Mary with many another woman those days, not con-

THE GREEN BOUGH

scious enough of vision to speak their thoughts, saw the world gone mad in its passion to possess.

It seemed to matter little to her at whose door the iniquity of lighting the firebrand lay. War had been inevitable whoever had declared it. The cry of broken treaties and sullied honor stirred but little in her heart as she heard it. What mattered it if a man was true to his word when all through the years he had been false to the very earth he dwelt on?

That cry of sullied honor through the land was as unreal to her as was the cry of sullied virtue that ever had conscripted women to the needs of men. The principles of possession could never be established with honor, the functions of life could never be circumscribed by virtue. It was not honorable to gain and keep. It was not virtuous to waste and wither.

War was inevitable. By the limitations of their own vision men had made it so. There was horror but no revolt in her mind when, on the morning of that fourth of August, she read the text of the British Ultimatum.

"They must give back now," she muttered to herself as she stood by her dressing table gazing down at a photograph of John in its frame. "They must all give back, sons, homes — everything. They've kept too long. It had to come."

A few days passed and then three letters came for her, one swift upon another. Each one as she received it, so certain had her subconscious knowledge been, she read almost without emotion. The announcement of war had not staggered her. She felt the ache

THE GREEN BOUGH

of pain, as when the barren cows were driven out of the farmyard to go to the market, but since she had been at Yarningdale, knew well enough the unerring and merciless power of retribution in Nature upon those who clogged the mill-wheel of life, who broke the impetus of its ceaseless revolutions whereby no speed was left to fling off the water drops of created energy.

Each letter as she received it, she divined its contents. The first was from John.

“DEAR OLD MATER —”

She heard the ring of vitality in that.

“They’re all going from here. If I cock on a year or two, they’ll take me. I sort of know you’d like me to. Do you know why? Do you remember once my asking you something about a couple of moles the hay knives had chopped? I was thinking of it yesterday, I don’t know why, and that made me realize you’d understand. Do you remember what you said about Death, that sometimes it was just a gift when things were worth while? Well — good Lord! It’s worth while now, not that the blighters are going to kill me. I’ve got as much chance as any one of getting through. But you are glad I’m going, aren’t you? You’re not going to try to stop me. They say the Army’s big enough with the French on one side and the Russians on the other to knock Germany into a cocked hat in three months. But I must get out and have one pot at ’em.”

All this she had divined as her fingers tore open the envelope, but never had she dared to hope that the

THE GREEN BOUGH

impulse of it would have come from his memory of what she had said to him those days when he was in the fashioning of her hands. This, she had made him. She clutched the letter in her hands and held it against her face and thanked God she had not wholly failed.

The next two letters came together by the same post on the following day. She knew their handwriting. No envelope could have concealed their contents from her eyes. Liddiard's she opened first.

"MY DEAR MARY —"

"I suppose John has written to you of this preposterous suggestion of his that he should volunteer, and I know you will do all you can to prevent it. To begin with he is not of age. He will have to lie about it before they can accept him and, secondly, War is a job for soldiers and the Army is there to see it through. If they rush him out without proper training as I hear it is likely they may do, it's unfair on him; it's unfair on all of us. We've paid for our Army as a nation and now it's got its work to do. Calling for recruits now as they did in the South African war is not fair to the country. These young boys will go because they're hysterical with excitement for adventure, but where will the country be if they don't come back?

"I rely on you, my dear Mary, to do all you can to dissuade him from this mad project of his. With all the knowledge that one day he is to be master of Wenlock, I know he still looks reliantly towards you in that little farmhouse. Do all you can, my dear. We cannot lose him, neither you nor I."

With a hard line about her lips which, had she seen it, would have reminded her of her sister Jane, she

THE GREEN BOUGH

laid the letter down and picked up that from Dorothy.

"Please — please don't let him go," it cried out from the written page to her. "I can't stop him. I've tried. He won't listen to me. I learnt those few days while I stayed at Yarningdale how he will listen to you. He belongs to me. He told me so. Please — please don't let him go."

She picked up the other letter and stood looking at them together, side by side, then dropped them from her hand and from the bosom of her dress drew out the slip of paper John had written on and pressed it once more against her cheek.

Downstairs in the parlor kitchen with the pen and ink that Mr. Peverell used when he kept his farm accounts, Mary sat down and wrote to Liddiard.

"If I could do everything, I would do nothing," she wrote. "This is what I made him. I would not unmake him if I could. You must give. I must give. We must all give now. We've kept too long. Don't you know what this war is? It's not England fighting for her rights or Germany for her needs. It's Nature revolting against man. You've made your chapels and your tithe barns for yourselves. The earth is going to shake them into the dust again. If I could do everything, I would do nothing. He takes my heart with him when he goes. But there is nothing I can do. We must all give now — at last — women as well as men. These things that happen now — these are the consequences of passion."

IX

TO Mary Throgmorton, tending and milking Mr. Peverell's cows at Yarningdale Farm, those first few weeks of the Great War were as the resultant dream that shadows the apprehensive mind.

Every morning after her work was done, she would retire to her room with her newspapers, therein to read the countless conflicting reports which they contained. The feverish desire to give active help or be amongst the first of those personally to contribute to the cause found her calm and self-possessed. She had her work to do. So long as the cows were there in Mr. Peverell's meadows, they had to be milked. Her duty it had been for the last eighteen years to milk them. Her duty it seemed to her to continue.

From all the villages round about them, the young men were going up to join the colors. Little processions of them accompanied by their mothers and sweet-hearts passed along the roads to the station, going to the nearest recruiting office. Most of them had flowers in their caps and went singing on their way, lifting their voices to a cheer at sight of any whom they passed.

Whenever she met them, Mary cheered in fervent response; but looking back over her shoulder when they had gone by, there were tears, hot and stinging in her

THE GREEN BOUGH

eyes, so that always their departure to her was through a mist. They vanished, nebulous, like spirits, out of her sight. She looked till she could see no longer. The vision of them trembled as the air trembles over the scorching earth on a summer's day. She felt it was the last vision she would ever have of them.

Only their mothers and their sweethearts came back, little weeping groups of them, along the same road. Whenever she saw these approaching her, she would break her way into the fields or the woods rather than pass them by. For more than the boys themselves with the high light of a strange laughter in their eyes, it was the faces of the mothers as they all went by together, that had dragged, like the warning pains of child-birth, at her heart.

Pale beneath the wind-burnt ruddy skins they were. It was pallor of anger; anger of soul at the senseless waste. The cry of England for her sons was loud indeed. In countless hearts the note of it was shrilling without need of proclamation. These boys had heard it and heard no more. Their mothers had heard it too. No less had it rung its cry in Mary's ears. But deeper and further-reaching was the hearing of the women in those early days of war.

Later, doubtless, their senses became almost numb to the true meaning of that voice flung far across the land. Even the vitality of despair grew still in their breasts. The horrors of war sickened, choked, asphyxiated them. They gave their sons like animals going to the slaughter house with eyes that were staring and

THE GREEN BOUGH

wide, and in whose nostrils the heavy smell of blood had acted as a soporific on the brain.

But at first, Mary had little doubt of the look she saw in those mothers' eyes. They were giving up, not what they had got, but what they had made. The created thing they were sacrificing; the thing which in love and pain and energy of soul they had offered out of themselves to give life to. There was little of the fervor of patriotism about them. To those country railway stations they marched with their pale faces, their set lips, the aching pain in their eyes. Each for her son's sake smiled as he looked at her; each for her son's sake smiled as she waved farewell. But on the hollow mask she wore, that smile was but a painted thing. He looked to his sweetheart or he laughed to his companions and it died away.

Somewhere in their buried and inarticulate consciousness, those mothers knew that wrong was being done to them. Vaguely they knew it was man with his laws of force and his passion of possession who had done that wrong; vaguely they knew it, but had no clear vision in their hearts to give them voice to revile.

Such an one Mary came upon, a day when rain had driven her to take shelter and she came back by a foot-path across the fields. On the smooth rail of a well-worn stile the woman was seated, her feet resting for support on the step below, her body faintly swinging to and fro, not for comfort but as though she rocked sorrow like a suffering babe in her arms.

At sound, then sight of Mary who must cross the

THE GREEN BOUGH

stile if she passed that way, the woman sat erect and took her feet down from their resting-place.

Once having seen her, she looked no more at Mary as she approached, but set her face outwards with a steady gaze in her eyes. In an impetus of memory, Mary recognized her as one of a little band she had seen marching to the station earlier in the day. She had been alone with her son. No sweetheart was there to share their parting. Alone she had bid farewell to him. Alone she returned.

Had there been others with her, Mary might have turned back; at least she would have hurried by. Now, coming to the stile, she stopped.

"Have you lost your way?" she inquired.

"No, thank you, Miss."

"It was only I saw you coming by the road this morning and this footpath doesn't lead to Lonesome Ford."

"We came by the road because all the boys were going that way. They take it easier when they go all together. Seems they laugh in a crowd. What we have acomin' back seems best alone."

Mary made gentle inquiries, what recruiting office her son had gone to — what regiment he hoped to join — his age — his trade — what other sons she had.

"He's my only —" she replied steadily.

Had she broken into weeping, Mary would have comforted and left her. Tears are their own solace and need no company. But there were no tears here. She sat upon the top rail of the stile, her head high

THE GREEN BOUGH

above Mary, her features sharp and almost hard against the sky, her eyes set fast across the rolling fields that dipped and lifted, with elm-treed hollows and uplands all spread gold with corn.

"I have one only," said Mary quietly. "He's in training now."

That made them one, but the calm voice of her who had spoken made the other lean towards that unity for dependence. Impulsively she stretched out her hand and straight and firmly Mary took it.

"I don't know who you are, Ma'am," she said with words her emotion quickened on her lips. "I'm more or less of a stranger to these parts. You may be a grand lady for all I know and judging by your voice, but the way you spoke and all that's happening these days, seems to me we're all just women now."

"All just women," said Mary softly.

She responded eagerly to the gentle encouragement and went swiftly on as though no interruption had been made.

"What I mean," she said, "we've both just parted from what's dearest to us in life — that makes us one. You might be a lord's lady and I just one of common folk — no less, we're one. Something's happened to us that's made us look up like and see each other — it's made you put out your hand to me and what I want to know is what it is that's happened, because with all these talks of England in danger and hatred of those beasts of Germans, there seems something else and I can't get it right. I know, now it's come to it, my

THE GREEN BOUGH

son's got to go out and fight. I wouldn't stop him. But I don't think I'd have brought him into the world if I'd known. There are some as like fighting. He doesn't. He cried in my lap last night, but not because he couldn't make up his mind to go. He knew he was going this morning, but he cried in my lap and I heard him say, 'I know I shall fight and hate and go mad with the rest of them when it comes to the time.' I don't rightly know what he meant by that. I hope he does hate but it seemed to me as if it was that he feared most."

"Perhaps he saw himself mad and drunk with blood," said Mary. "Can't you imagine he'd loathe the sight of that? Have you ever seen a woman intoxicated with drink?"

"Once I did — no — twice I did."

"Would you like to think of yourself like that?"

She bent her head.

"You've made that plain," she muttered. "I didn't care asking him at the time. Seemed he just wanted to go talking on with no questions. There'll be hundreds like him, I suppose, thousands perhaps and some as like fighting. 'Twill be an adventure to them, but hell it'll be to him. P'r'aps that's as it must be. The world's all sorts. But I can't help thinking the world's wrong for us women. Be they the fighting kind or not, we didn't bring 'em into the world for this wasting. They say that thousands of our boys were lost during that first retreat from 'Mons' I think they call it. If you saw the thousands of mothers they belong

THE GREEN BOUGH

to all come together in a crowd like the boys marching and they had some one to lead 'em, what would they do to them as have made this war? They'd tear them limb from limb. That's what they'd do. I used to think the world was a fair and sweet enough place once. They told us there, those people up in London in the Government there could be no war. The papers said it. Up to the last they said it. Every man said it to you, too. There can't be no war, they said, not a big European war, they said, the world 'd stop still in a month, they said, there'd be no trade. Seems to me men go sweating in labor and toiling with work and half the time they don't know what they're making."

Mary let her talk on. So plain it was to be seen that it gave her ease; so plain that this was the accumulation of her thoughts, flowing over from the full vessel of her heart that could hold no more.

"What's all this," she continued, "all this they've been saying about treaties and what they call International Law? Seems to me we've let men make the world long enough. They've made hell of it. How could there be peace with them making all those guns and ships and weapons which was only invented to destroy peace? I don't believe nothing's made to waste in this world. If you make a thing it'll get itself used somehow and if it don't and goes to rust, then something's wrong in the minds of them as wasted their time on it. If my man had told me before we married I'd got to give him a son as one day would be crying in my

THE GREEN BOUGH

lap because he found life horrible, do you think I'd have married him? No — he told me the little home we was going to have and all the things he'd give me to put in it and how when I was going to have a child he'd work so hard as we could afford to get a girl in to help. That's what he told me those evenings we walked up and down the lanes courting, and that's what it seems to me men in high places who make the Government have been telling those thousands of mothers that have their hearts broken now this very hour. Men want to get hold of things in this world. Grasping always they are. And nations are like men, because men have had the making of them. And the nation that has the most men has the most power to grasp, and the more they grasp, the more will others get jealous of them, and the more they get jealous, the more they'll need to fight. But who gives them the power they have? Who gives them the sons they ask for? And what I want to know is why do we go on giving for them to spoil?"

Mary watched her as the last rush of her words lit up her eyes to a sullen anger.

"Countless women will think like you," she said quietly, "when this war's over. They won't listen any more when men tell them there's honor in their slavery or pride in the service that they give. We shall bring children into the world on our own conditions, not on theirs. To our own ideals we shall train them; not to the ideals of men. You're not the first who's

THE GREEN BOUGH

thought these things. I've thought them too and hundreds of others are thinking them and we shan't be the last."

She stretched out her hand.

"There's a new world to be made," she said with a thrill in her voice. "Men have had their vision. We can't deny they've had that. Without their vision would they ever have been able to persuade us as they have? They've had their vision while we've had none. They've had their vision and it's brought us so far. When women find a vision of their own; when once they see in a clear picture the thoughts that are aching in their hearts now, nothing will stop them. You see and I see, but we are powerless by ourselves. I know just how powerless we are, even to have faith in our own sight. I thought I had faith once — enough faith to carry me right through — but I hadn't. At the crucial moment that faith failed me. I had trained my son so far in the light of the vision I had and then they came and with all the threats they made of the good things he was losing in life, my courage failed me. I let them have him for their own and little by little I've watched him drift away from me."

"Do you know," she added, coming to a swift realization as she spoke, "do you know I'm almost glad of this War. He volunteered at once, though he's only eighteen. He volunteered against his father's wishes. This war's going to stop him drifting. It's going to stop thousands from drifting as they were. They'll see there's something wrong with the civilization they

THE GREEN BOUGH

have built up, that it's an earthquake, a volcano, a state of being which any moment may tumble or burst into flame about their heads. For that, I'm not sorry for the War. We couldn't have shown men how wrong they were without it. It'll be to their mothers they'll go — these boys — when they come back."

She took her hand away and climbed over the stile.

"You'll have him back," she said. "One of these days you'll have his head in your lap again."

For one moment they looked in each other's eyes. There was a compact in that look. In purpose they had found sympathy. Out of the deep bitterness of life they had found a meaning.

Once, as she walked away, Mary looked over her shoulder. The woman still sat there on the stile, still with her features cut sharp in profile against the sky, still gazing across the elm-treed hollows and the uplands all spread with gold of corn.

On Sunday night, October the fourth, in a little force of naval reserves, John marched from Ostend to his battle position on the Nethe.

Mary did not know where he had gone. He had not known himself. In the midst of his training, the order had come for his departure. Two hours he had had with her at Yarningdale; no more. All that time he had laughed and talked in the highest spirits. Constrained to laugh with him, her eyes had been bright, her courage wonderful.

It was not until she drove back alone in the spring

THE GREEN BOUGH

cart from the station, that she knew the brightness in her eyes had sunk as in those other women's eyes to the sullen light of anger.

"Oh — the waste — the senseless waste of it!" she had muttered that night as she lay waiting for the relief of sleep.

The next five days had passed in silence. She went about her duties as usual, but none seeing her dared speak about the War. It was whispered only in that parlor kitchen; whispers that fell with sibilant noises into silence whenever she came into the room.

Each morning, as always, she took her papers away to her room to read. Nothing of that which she yearned to know could they tell her. On the ninth of October Antwerp had fallen. Amongst all the strongholds that were crumbling beneath the weight of the German guns, this meant nothing to her. She laid the paper down and went out into the fields.

It was the evening of three days later when she was milking the cows in their stalls, that Mrs. Peverell came, bringing her a telegram into the shed. Her hands were wet with milk as they took it. They slipped on the shiny envelope as, without hesitation, she broke it open.

When she had read it, she looked up, handing it in silence to Mrs. Peverell, then turned with the sense of habit alone remaining in her fingers and continued with her milking.

(1)

THE END

$\frac{x+1}{2w}$

